

4
NOVEL

Raven of the Inner Palace

WRITTEN BY
Kouko Shirakawa





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The cover is decorated with several black feathers of various sizes and orientations, scattered around the central text and logo.

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Kouko
Shirakawa



Seven Seas Entertainment

KOKYU NO KARASU

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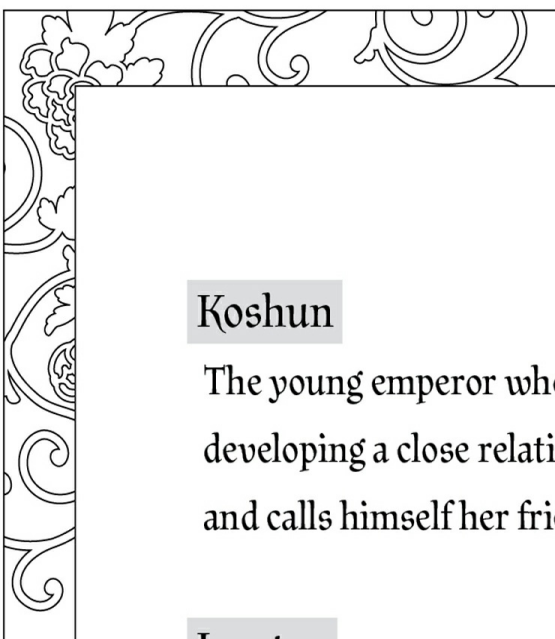
The Silkworm God

The Golden Goblet

The Ink's Revelation

The Forbidden Color





Koshun

The young emperor who recently ascended the throne. He is developing a close relationship with the Raven Consort, Jusetsu, and calls himself her friend.

Jusetsu

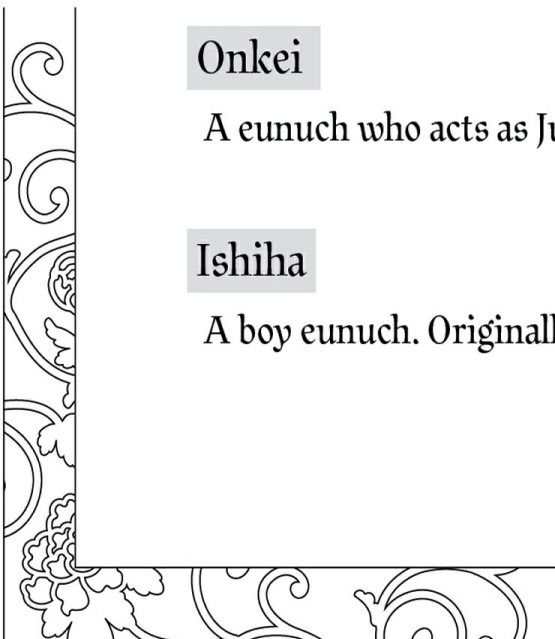
The current Raven Consort. A mysterious and solitary young woman with mystical abilities.

Eisei

A eunuch who pledges absolute loyalty to Koshun.

Jiujiu

Jusetsu's lady-in-waiting. A gentle girl who's prone to sticking her nose into things.



Onkei

A eunuch who acts as Jusetsu's bodyguard on Eisei's orders.

Ishiha

A boy eunuch. Originally from a minority tribe in the west.

Banka

The Crane Consort. One of Koshun's consorts who still has an innocent side to her. Fond of Jusetsu.

Choyo

Banka's father and member of a powerful clan. Leader of a minority tribe that originated from the land of Kakami generations ago.

Hakurai

A shaman and the founder of a new religion known as the Eight True Teachings.

Injo

The young shrine maiden of the Eight True Teachings.

Reijo

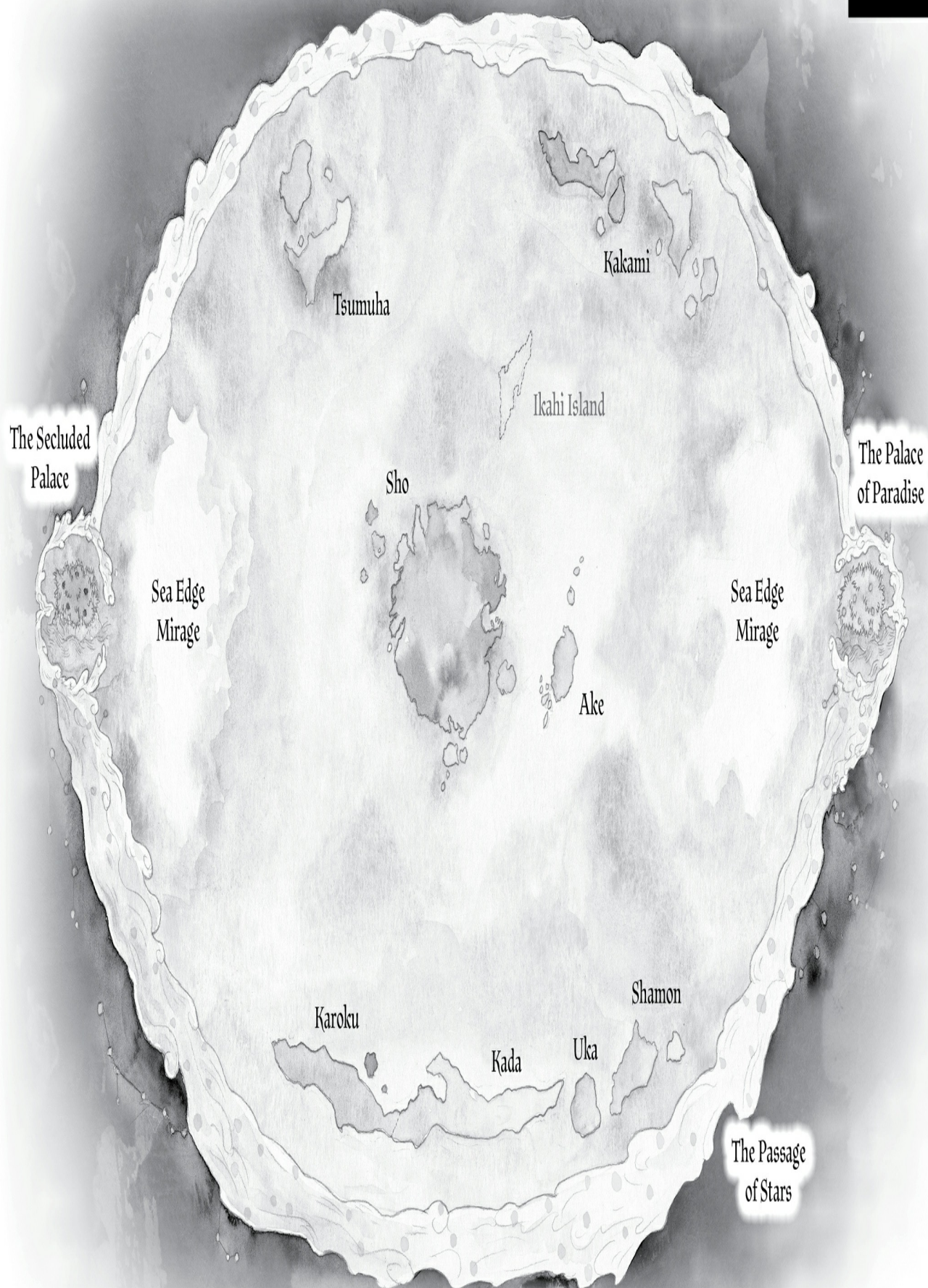
Former Raven Consort. Deceased.

Gyoei

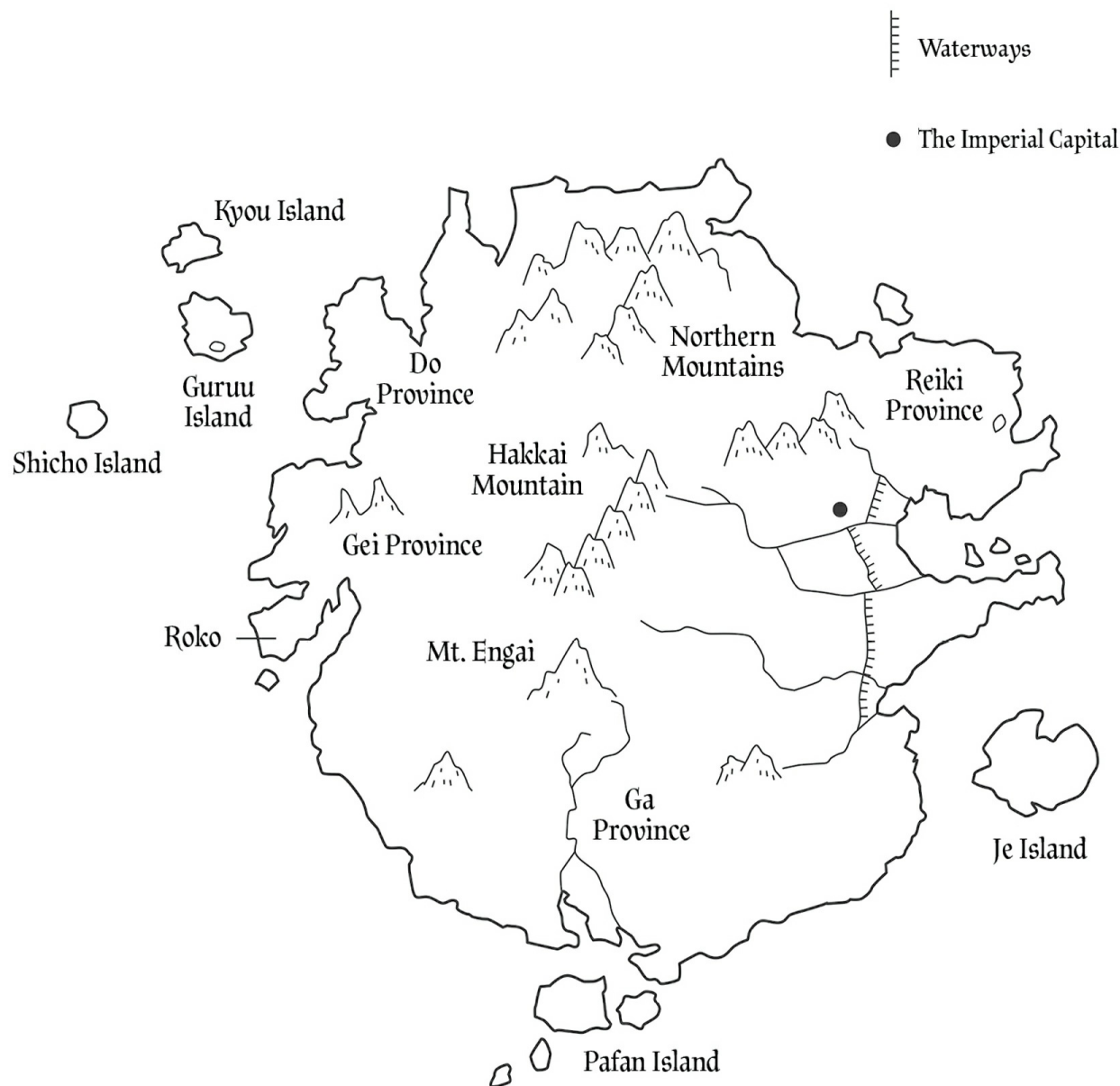
Former Winter Minister. Deceased.

Kajo

Granddaughter of Koshun's beloved master and grand chancellor, Un Eitoku. Also a childhood friend of Koshun.

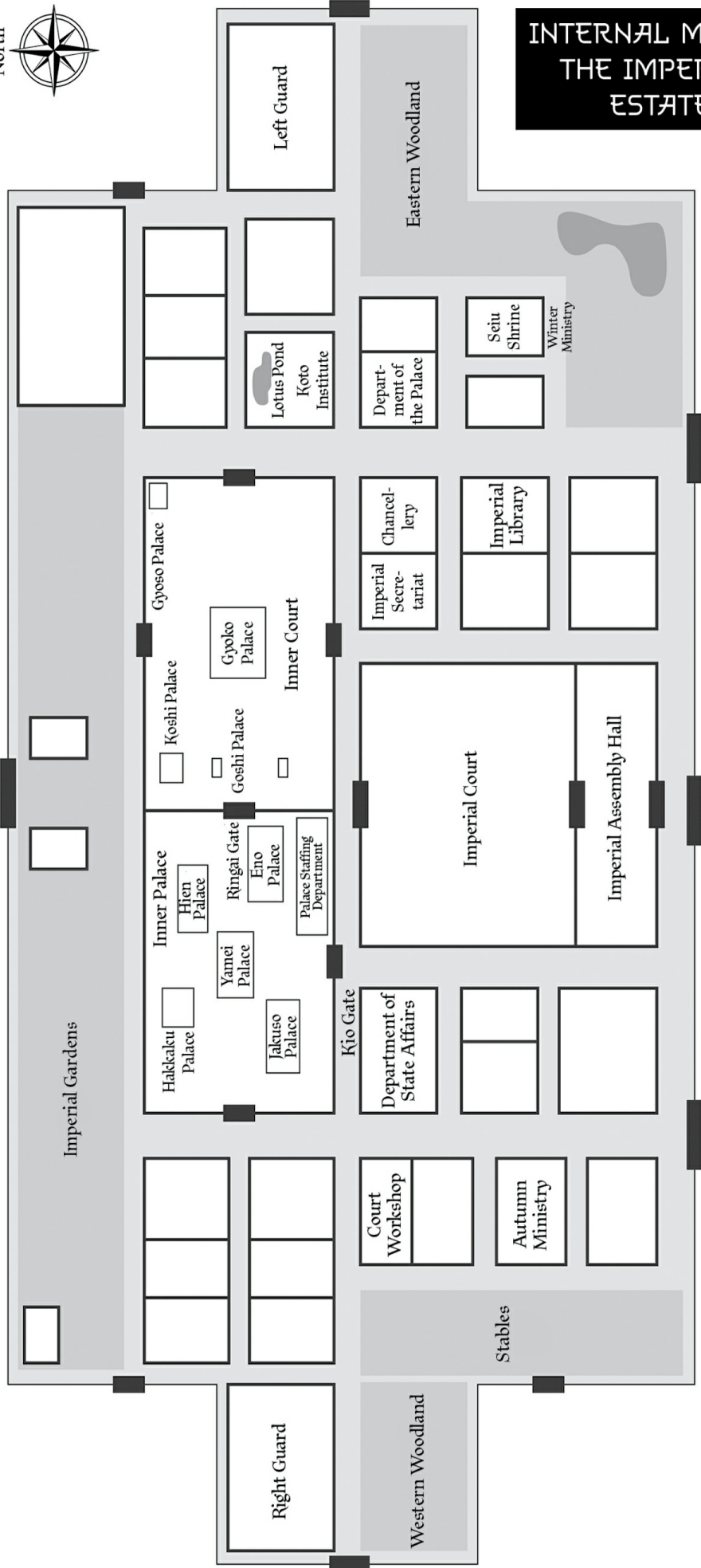


MAP OF SHO





INTERNAL MAP OF
THE IMPERIAL
ESTATE



*The
Silkworm
God*

When the moonlight fell into the sea

A pair of gods were begotten

One was the god of shade

One was the god of light

After eight thousand nights at the edge of the sea

The first god conceals itself in the black palace building

The second god frolics as it dances and sings along to the music

The first in the Secluded Palace, the second in the Palace of Paradise

There is a god that was born from the water gate of the Secluded Palace

Its name, the great turtle god

Its body hewn into eight as punishment for its crime

It was banished from the Secluded Palace

Its head became Je

Its arm formed Pafan

Its leg turned into Guruu

Ravines formed out of its shell

Its blood turned into rivers

Its eyeballs turned into swamps

Its breath created whirlpools and called in the tide

Ears of rice grew on its rotting flesh and dropped their seeds

Mulberry and silkworms grew

People were born

And then, from a single piece of bone,

The white turtle god was created,

Known as the ao god

A god to calm the stormy seas and protect our boats

This god's eighth generation descendent

The White Sovereign, the first emperor...

—FROM A SONGBIRD TROUPE SONG

IN FRONT OF BANKA lay a wooden box containing bundles of raw silk. The silk was milk-white, almost the color of morning mist, and had a gentle luster to it. Her father, Choyo, had sent her the most fine-quality fabrics that Ga Province had produced.

The fine silk from Ga Province was considered the best silk in all of Sho. The silkworm culture in Ga Province began long ago, when the Saname clan came from Kakami and brought silkworms with them. Choyo had put great effort into selectively breeding these silkworms, which led to Ga Province's silk earning its current reputation. Even Banka herself had taken care of the silkworms from a very young age, under her father's orders. The silkworms' spring phase, summer phase, fall phase, and then their late autumn phase... Every day, she would pick mulberry leaves to give to them and clean up afterward. When the silk-raising period arrived in late autumn, she would bring them into the place where they would spin their cocoons. Once they were inside, she would remove the fluff, sort it out, and then repeat the process.

Banka liked the sound of the silkworms eating. She would sit in the corner of the cocoonery and carefully listen to them crunching away enthusiastically at the mulberry leaves. She felt as if she was enveloped by drizzling rain as she listened to them. That sound was the sound of life itself, and it always calmed her down.

However, this only made the dark feeling in her chest when she saw the cocoons she'd chosen being boiled to death in scalding water and their silk being extracted even more chilling. The sound of hot water simmering was the sound of lives being snatched away. Despite all this, the spun silk still had a cold glimmer to it and was—above all—simply stunning to look at.

Whenever that silk slid against her skin, it always felt cold to her—much like standing in a dark shadow on a winter's day.

Banka removed one of the bundles of raw silk from the box in front of her.

She touched the paper wrapped around the rolled-up fabric that kept it together. Deceitful merchants would wrap lead or scrap iron into that part to falsify the bundle's weight. Obviously, no one would have used such a trick here

—this was a package from her father, after all—but they *had* done something else. She probed around with her fingers and located a string made of twisted paper attached to the back of the wrapping. This was how she always received letters that—unlike ordinary letters—she wouldn't want anyone else to see. She peeled off the twisted string and carefully opened it up. On the narrow, long strip of paper, there was a short message in her father's handwriting.

"Stay away from the Raven Consort," it read.

Banka's breath caught in her throat. *But why?*

Her father never gave a reason for his written commands, and she just went along with whatever her father told her. That was why she told him every little thing that happened in the inner palace, as well as informed him of how the emperor seemed up close. She believed it was all for the good of her father, and by extension, for the Saname clan as a whole.

And that was also why she had written to her father about Jusetu's secret—the way the young woman was hiding her true hair color.

Jusetu saved Banka's life. She even wanted to be friends with her. And yet Banka still revealed her secret. It had taken a lot of deliberation and weighing the two of them against each other, but in the end, Banka chose her father. However, she couldn't understand why her father—after hearing about Jusetu's secret—concluded that Banka should stay away from her.

That said, he didn't need to have issued her an order—she would have gone along with whatever he said anyway. But...how was she supposed to act around Jusetu going forward? There was no chance of them becoming friends now.

Banka passed her hand over the silk. It was cold but felt hot at the same time—so hot that it made her flinch. It was the heat of life—the heat of harvested lives.

There's no way there's that much heat within me, Banka thought.

The young woman recalled sorting out the best cocoons back when her job was to separate the good cocoons from the bad ones. Sometimes an unusable cocoon was dead, meaning that there was a dead pupa that had decomposed inside. Those pupae would rot and dissolve into a sticky mess.

I'm just the same as those dead pupae.

Unbeknownst to anyone around her, Banka was rotting internally and turning to mush. She was dying on the inside, while the rest of her looked like nothing was wrong...

"I heard there's a ghost in the cocoonery," said Jiujiu.

It was the time of night when a veil of darkness had fully descended upon the inner palace when Jiujiu brought up this rumor. The weather was getting cooler with every passing day, and the sun was setting earlier too. Insects could be heard in the distance. And as always, the hanging lanterns on the Yamei Palace remained unlit, plunging the palace into dark obscurity.

The only other person here in the room with Jusetsu was her lady-in-waiting, Jiujiu. Jiujiu decided to stay up until the early hours of the morning to keep Jusetsu company, even though Jusetsu insisted that it was unnecessary. People came to visit the Raven Consort at night, so she had no choice but to stay up. People from every corner of the inner palace would sneak over to the Yamei Palace under the cover of darkness so no one would see them request the help of the black-robed consort, who was said to take on any request—anything from locating missing items to cursing people to death.

"Where...?" Jusetsu asked back. She wasn't familiar with the term Jiujiu had used.

"In the cocoonery. You know, the place where people raise silkworms."

"Is there really such a place in the inner palace?"

"Apparently, there's a mulberry forest north of the Hakkaku Palace. It's there. There was one there in the previous dynasty too, and during the reign of the emperor before last. The previous emperor's empress hated silkworms, so it got knocked down, but His Majesty built a new one. You've heard what an amazing job they do at raising silkworms at the Crane Consort's family home, haven't you?"

"Banka's family home...? Are you talking about the Saname clan in Ga Province?"

“Of course. That’s why the cocoonery was built for Banka. She used to raise silkworms at home. Well, it’s the Hakkaku Palace’s court ladies who take on that work here, but still...” Jiujiu said. “Anyway, that’s where the main part of the story comes into play. There’s a ghost in that very cocoonery.”

“Oh my,” said Jusetu. “The ghost of a *silkworm*?”

“No! The ghost of a court lady.”

Jiujiu then proceeded to explain the story.

During the previous dynasty, there was a court lady who worked in the cocoonery. One day, she carelessly stepped on a silkworm and ended up killing it. She didn’t divulge her mistake to anyone, though, and instead chose to stay quiet—for if she did say anything, she’d be punished.

However, on the evening of the incident, she suddenly started experiencing pains, and she began spewing raw silk out of her mouth. More and more kept coming out, showing no signs of stopping. As this was happening, her body soon grew emaciated. Then, another court lady cut the raw silk from her with a pair of scissors in a panic—and the woman collapsed onto the ground with a thud and died. Legend had it that her hair had turned as white as raw silk.

“That was the silkworm’s wrath,” Jiujiu said with fear in her voice. She clasped her hands against her cheeks.

Jusetu gave her a puzzled look. “That story sounds like it’s about a court lady incurring a silkworm’s wrath and dying from it, not a court lady’s ghost.”

“The story is only just the beginning, niangniang. People say that the ghost of the court lady who died from that curse is the same one who’s in the cocoonery. After that, her ghost started appearing there frequently, blending in with the other court ladies to take care of the silkworms. She’d get mixed in with the others without them realizing, and then disappear as soon as they noticed. She even appeared during the reign of the emperor before last. There wasn’t a cocoonery while the previous emperor was on the throne, so I don’t think there were any sightings of her then, but now...”

“Now that there’s a cocoonery again, she’s come back.”

“Exactly,” replied Jiujiu, giving her a deep nod. “It doesn’t seem like she’s

causing any problems for the other court ladies and the curse is seemingly no more, but the court ladies from the Hakkaku Palace are scared.”

“Did someone from the Hakkaku Palace tell you that?” Jusetu asked.

“No, I actually heard it from a court lady who works for the Eno Palace. She told me the story when we went there earlier today to fetch some scrap paper for Ishiha to practice his writing on.”

Ishiha, the Yamei Palace’s boy eunuch, was currently in the process of learning how to read and write. They needed endless amounts of paper for the task, and they’d get scrap paper from others for that very reason.

There were chatty court ladies at every palace, so Jiujiu would pick up bits of gossip wherever she went. Some of the information she gathered was valuable, but the rest of it was useless nonsense.

“Unless you’ve heard something from the horse’s mouth, you never know how much of it is true,” Jusetu warned.

“Should I ask a court lady from the Hakkaku Palace for their side of the story?”

“There’s no need to...”

Jusetu cut herself off and glanced over toward the doorway. Shinshin, her golden chicken, was flapping its wings about. They had a visitor.

“Niangniang,” called a voice on the other side of the doors. It was Onkei, a eunuch who worked as her bodyguard. “I found a court lady lost in the woods, so I’ve brought her with me.”

The Yamei Palace was surrounded by a thick woodland of bay trees and rhododendrons. These woods were dark and dingy in the daytime, and even darker on nights like this when the clouds were covering the moon. If one wasn’t careful, they could easily lose their bearings.

The doors opened, and the petite court lady Onkei had brought with him entered the room with a worried look on her face. She kneeled down in front of Jusetu and bowed.

“Tankai will soon slack off if I don’t keep an eye on him,” Onkei declared

simply, and went back outside.

Tankai was the other eunuch who acted as Jusetu's bodyguard. In contrast to Onkei—who was taciturn, serious, and honest—Tankai talked a great deal and slacked off enough to match.

"Raven Consort. There's something I'd like to request of you, if you'd be so kind as to accept."

After reeling off that line in a feeble, nervous voice, the court lady prostrated herself in front of Jusetu. Her head almost touched the floor. Judging by the way the woman was acting, the issue she was requesting Jusetu's help for had driven her into a corner.

"I can't hear you well from over there. Come and sit down here." Jusetu pointed toward the seat opposite her. The court lady stood up, looking confused, hesitantly walked over to the seat, and sat herself down.

"Your name?" Jusetu asked curtly.

"My last name is Nen and my first name is Shuji. I work for the Hakkaku Palace, but I mainly work in the cocoonery."

Jusetu exchanged looks with Jiujiu, who stood by her side. Jusetu had thought that somebody would come and see her if there really *was* something strange going on—she wouldn't need to go to the Hakkaku Palace to check herself. And as it turned out, she was right, but she hadn't expected a visitor to appear with such perfect timing.

"Is there a ghost in the cocoonery?"

"Did you know about that already?" Shuji asked with admiration. She sounded impressed, but not surprised by the Raven Consort's apparent knowledge.

"No, I just happened to hear a rumor," Jusetu said, clarifying. She didn't want people to think that she knew everything. "All I heard was that there was a ghost of a court lady."

"That's correct. It's the ghost of a court lady who died in the previous dynasty, after incurring the wrath of a silkworm."

The story Shuji told her about the ghost was the same as the rumor Jusetsu had heard from Jiujiu.

“All of a sudden, that court lady’s ghost was there in the cocoonery. When we bring over mulberry leaves to feed to the silkworms, for example, we’re too busy to look at each and every court lady’s face. However, I suddenly looked up to find a court lady I didn’t recognize giving the silkworms a mulberry leaf. I let out a cry of surprise, and in that same moment, she disappeared. I’m not the only one who’s seen her, either.”

According to Shuji, the court lady had been appearing in the cocoonery fairly often.

“If that was all there was to it, I never would have thought to consult the Raven Consort. I’m busy taking care of the silkworms, so—to be frank—I don’t have the time to worry about one or two court lady ghosts. The ghost would appear out of nowhere just to disappear again soon after, and she wasn’t causing any harm, so it didn’t take long for us all to get used to her. We already had our hands full trying to raise the silkworms unharmed and getting good cocoons. But then...”

The look on Shuji’s face clouded over as she trailed off.

“Did somebody get hurt?”

Shuji nodded. “Yes. Well, it’s not as if we got sick or were injured. No... What happened was even more awful,” she said, hanging her head. Her face was so pale that it was almost green.

“Awful?”

“Yes,” Shuji said. “Some cocoons disappeared.”

Jusetsu felt somewhat let down by that. “Are you telling me that’s even more awful?”

“They’re very important to us. The silkworms raised in that cocoonery belong to the Crane Consort, and by extension are His Majesty’s possessions. We must not let any of them die in vain. And losing them is out of the question.”

“How many did you lose?” Jusetsu asked.

“So far, two.”

“Can you really tell if such a tiny number of silkworms go missing? There must be so many of them in there.”

“Naturally, it’s impossible to tell when they’re at the larva stage, but when the silkworms are mature—that’s to say, when they’re ready to make their cocoons—we move them into a device woven from straw known as a silkworm frame. They make their cocoons there. We place one silkworm into each space, so it’s obvious if a cocoon doesn’t form in one of those spaces. The cocoons that disappeared had finished the cocooning process, and all that was left to do was take away the fluff—but yesterday, they disappeared while we weren’t looking...”

“And you think that was the ghost’s doing?”

“Of course, we initially thought that they might have just fallen out of the silkworm frame for some reason or another, so we searched not only the stand and the floor, but the entire room as well,” Shuji explained. “We looked in the court ladies’ robes too, but the cocoons were still nowhere to be found. That was when one of the court ladies remembered something... According to her, the ghost had shown herself just before the cocoons disappeared. She figured it was the same ghost that everyone else knew about, so she left it to its own devices, just like everyone else does... She didn’t actually see the ghost taking the cocoons, but there’s nowhere else they could have gone. From the moment we entered the room to the moment we discovered they were missing, nobody had left to go outside—and yet the cocoons weren’t in the room, nor were they in any of our robes. There’s no way that any of us could have taken them. After all, we’d be the ones to get punished if cocoons went missing, so nobody would dare to do such a thing.”

“That’s a fair assessment,” said Jusetu, nodding.

“We haven’t gathered up the cocoons yet, so the Crane Consort hasn’t been told how many there are. That’s why we all got together and decided to pretend that the missing ones died. Umm...” Shuji glanced over at Jusetu to gauge her reaction.

“I won’t tell her,” Jusetu assured the woman without a moment’s delay.

Shuji looked relieved and continued. “But then, what if the ghost reappears and takes some more of our cocoons? Tomorrow, we begin harvesting all the completed cocoons. We’ll collect them all and separate the good-quality, usable cocoons from the unusable ones. However, if any of the usable cocoons go missing, we’re done for. We’ll have already counted how many there are, so there’ll be no way of covering it up.”

In that case, there would be a punishment awaiting them. That was why Shuji felt the situation was so dreadful.

“So, you’re saying that the ghost of the dead court lady who incurred the silkworm’s wrath is stealing silkworm cocoons...” Jusetsu whispered. “You may have been able to conceal the missing cocoons last time, but if this carries on, you could find yourself in a difficult situation.”

“Yes. We raise silkworms in the Crane Consort’s cocoonery three times a year—in the spring, the summer, and the fall. The thought of the same thing occurring again makes me anxious.” Shuji covered her face with her sleeve.

“Hmm.” Jusetsu thought to herself. “If this really is the work of a ghost, we risk falling behind if we waste time investigating the spirit. I can start by creating a spiritual barrier in the cocoonery so that the ghost can’t get in, but...”

Shuji looked up. “Really? Will that work?”

“Well, it’s hard to say anything without seeing the ghost for myself.”

“Yes, please, go ahead and try!” Shuji was so pleased that she almost grabbed Jusetsu’s hand, but her expression soon clouded over. “Oh, but Raven Consort, there is another problem with all this.”

“What is it?” Jusetsu asked.

“It has to do with the missing cocoons. If they really did just disappear into thin air, then that’s that—but if the ghost took them away somewhere, then we’ll be in trouble.”

“Why?”

“The silkworms in the cocoonery come from Ga Province,” Shuji explained. “They’re not from this region. If, by any chance, those silkworms emerge from

their cocoons and mate with the wild or domesticated silkworms in this part of the country, it'll cause problems. The breeds will get mixed up."

"Oh... I see." *So that's an issue as well*, Jusetsu thought to herself. "In that case, do you wish for me to track the cocoons down?"

"They should emerge from their cocoons in about ten days' time. We'd have to find them before then..." Shuji covered her face. It looked like she was quite distressed by the sudden calamity that had befallen her.

"I think we could talk to Banka—the Crane Consort—about this. I doubt she'd issue you a very strict punishment," Jusetsu suggested.

"Well, *she* might not..." Shuji began, initially hesitant to say what she really wanted to. She looked down at the floor. "But her father might."

"Banka's father? The current head of the Saname clan?"

"Precisely..." replied Shuji, her eyes darting anxiously around. "Her father is a very harsh person, and the Crane Consort struggles to contravene him. If he orders her to punish us severely, she will do so."

That was the same man who'd told his daughter to choose between her own life or that of her adoptive sister. A god had placed a curse on the Saname clan that caused the youngest daughter of the head of the clan to die at the age of fifteen with no exceptions. In order to circumvent this curse, Banka's father had adopted a daughter who was younger than her. When Banka pleaded to her father to save the girl, he told her that she'd need to sacrifice herself in her adopted sister's place. In the end, the adopted sister died, and Banka lived. This story made Jusetsu wonder what kind of man this Saname Choyo could have been to force such a choice on his own daughter.

Shuji covered her mouth with her sleeve. "I shouldn't have said that. Please, forget what I just said."

Jusetsu promised that she would go to the cocoonery the next day, and Shuji soon returned home.

"As generous as the Crane Consort is, her father must be a very unsparing character—considering that even the court ladies fear him," Jiujiu, who'd been waiting in silence, said once she finally had the chance to speak.

“The actions of a consort do tend to reflect the wishes of her family to some degree, but even so...”

Jusetsu looked over at the lattice window, although she knew there was no way she’d be able to see the Hakkaku Palace from where she was. If Banka—and the Hakkaku Palace—were wrapped around Saname Choyo’s little finger, then that could prove to be a problem.

Still, Jusetsu was sure that Koshun would already know that.

A vision of the young emperor’s unreadable face came to mind. It wasn’t Jusetsu’s place to be worrying about his consorts and their families. The Raven Consort had nothing to do with the outside world, after all.

She sat there in silence, gazing through the window and staring into the darkness of the inner palace at night.

That morning, Jusetsu headed out to the cocoonery with Onkei as accompaniment. She noticed that on the other side of the Hakkaku Palace sat a lush mulberry forest.

“Is that...?” Jusetsu murmured.

“Yes,” Onkei replied as he walked behind her. “The mulberry forest has been there since the previous dynasty. Even when there was no active cocoonery, people still took care of it.”

“Why *do* they raise silkworms in the inner palace?” she asked.

“It’s not just in the inner palace. There’s another cocoonery in the outer court where selective breeding and research are carried out. That was where raw silk for the emperor and his family’s use was originally produced.”

“Does that mean that the one in the inner palace produces silk for the empress?”

“That’s correct. It used to be much bigger than it is now,” noted Onkei.

His comment made Jusetsu envision the current one as a tiny, compact little building—but the cocoonery that appeared before her eyes was in fact a rather impressive structure. Of course, it wasn’t as grandiose as a consort’s palace, but

she spotted three buildings with blue glazed roof tiles lined up in a row, surrounded by roofed mud walls. Jusetu could hear the sound of palace ladies hard at work coming from the frontmost one, and she spotted eunuchs busily coming and going from the back building, carrying bundles of firewood.

“The one at the back is the mulberry storeroom, and the one at the front is the cocoonery proper,” Onkei explained. This man had frequented all kinds of different places as a spy under Eisei’s orders and knew just about everything, which proved to be very helpful to Jusetu. Onkei was quite handsome, and the scar from a sword wound that ran down his cheek in a straight line below his kind eyes seemed more like an embellishment that added to his beauty. His skills as a bodyguard also made him a force to be reckoned with. He was quick-witted, but also incredibly self-effacing in every possible way. He was efficient in all that he did and was all over a very competent attendant for Jusetu to have around.

The Raven Consort headed to the building in front of her, the one said to be the cocoonery. Before she went up the stairs, the door opened, and a court lady hurriedly rushed outside. It was Shuji.

“I apologize for not noticing you’d arrived, Raven Consort,” she said. “I was keeping an eye on what was going on out here, but I assumed it was just a eunuch...”

“It’s fine. Besides, I wouldn’t want anyone to notice me from afar.”

Jusetu was indeed dressed in her eunuch clothing so no one from the Hakkaku Palace would recognize her. The outfit really was useful—although Jiujiu, who really wanted to get Jusetu dressed up, had some complaints about it.

Jusetu then went to take a look inside the cocoonery. The court ladies appeared to be going about their work, harvesting the cocoons. When they heard the name “Raven Consort,” however, the women stopped what they were doing to get on their knees and bow to her, their hands placed together in a gesture of veneration.

“Carry on with your work,” Jusetu said. “You’ll make others suspicious.”

Startled by her instructions, the court ladies obediently returned to the task

at hand.

Inside the room were many shelves and a long table. On the table sat a concertina-like object made of straw. When Jusetsu noticed the cocoons hanging from it, she realized that it must have been the silkworm frame that Shuji talked about last night—the very one used for the silkworms to spin their cocoons on.

“We’re currently in the process of harvesting the cocoons. After this, we take away the fluff that surrounds them, and sort the good cocoons from the defective ones. The difference is that some are suitable for making silk, whereas the rest aren’t. Some of the defective ones are double cocoons where two silkworms have formed one singular cocoon, while others have a dead pupa rotting away inside. There’s also some soiled by urine or bodily fluids, and some with parts of the frame stuck to them... Those are the kinds of cocoons we get rid of,” Shuji explained. “And not only that, but we also sort the good-quality cocoons into those to extract silk from and those that’ll be allowed to emerge so they can lay eggs. The extracted silk is given to the Crane Consort, but after that, she will gift it to His Majesty.”

“In that case, once a cocoon has been categorized as being good, you can’t afford to lose a single speck of it,” Jusetsu deduced.

“Exactly,” said Shuji, casting her gaze downward. In other words, there was no time to waste.

Jusetsu placed a hand on her hair, but then realized that she didn’t have any of her usual flowers in it. She dressed up as a eunuch fairly often, but she still kept forgetting when they were missing.

She held her hand out in front of her and gathered some heat atop her palm. A pale red haze quivered there, which tangled up and intertwined with itself. Then that mist turned into a single petal—and then another one and another—until they eventually formed a peony.

Jusetsu blew on the flower, which turned into smoke and dissipated. The smoke then drifted around the room as if it was swimming through the air, wandering here and there between the court ladies.

The pale red smoke gradually gathered in one particular spot and started to

take on the shape of a person—a woman with her hair tied-up and adorned with a simple hairpin. Her pale and narrow face had thin eyelids with well-shaped eyebrows above them that looked like they'd been drawn on with a brush. The long robe that covered her thin body was not modern attire, but it did look well-made despite its simplicity. It suggested that she worked for one of the palaces.

Shuji let out a small shriek of panic and covered her mouth with her sleeve. “Th-that’s the ghost of the court lady that I saw.”

The other court ladies stopped what they were doing and stared at the ghost in wide-eyed astonishment. As they did so, the ghost suddenly moved and started silently walking toward the doorway. Jusetu shrank back to let the ghost go by. Then it disappeared, looking as if the door had swallowed it up.

The spirit had gone outside.

“R-Raven Consort, did—”

Jusetu interrupted Shuji mid-sentence. “Let’s follow it,” she said quickly to Onkei.

Onkei swiftly opened the door, and they went outside. The pair spotted the ghost trying to leave through the gate and Jusetu followed it. The spirit didn’t make any noise as it walked or as its clothes appeared to rustle, and the way the ghost moved seemed the same as any other living person. The only thing that set it apart from the living was the way the hem of its robe didn’t flutter, nor did its sleeves sway as it moved. It seemed unlikely that any court ladies would realize it was a ghost if it just stood there beside them. There were so many court ladies in the inner palace that there may well have been plenty of other ghosts who slipped in and out of the crowd, disguising themselves as the living.

The court lady’s ghost distanced itself from the cocoonery and headed further north, right to the edges of the inner palace. The area had not been maintained well, and the abandoned trees were wild and overgrown. There was no sign of anyone else in the vicinity at all.

Jusetu had been following the ghost wherever it happened to go, but she stepped out into a clearing and stopped in her tracks. In that area, she saw a

small, dense burial mound—clearly someone’s grave—covered in grass and moss. The ghost stood in front of it. The sunlight that flooded the area shone on the burial mound, causing the moss to glisten. As Jusetsu was staring at this scene, the ghost appeared to melt into the burial mound and disappeared into thin air.

What is this?

It couldn’t have been this ghost’s grave, as it was hard to imagine that a court lady would have a grave inside the inner palace.

“Who does that grave belong to?” she asked aloud.

Jusetsu turned around to face Onkei. Unusually, he didn’t have an answer.

“I shall look into it.”

“I’d appreciate that.”

After this short exchange, Jusetsu looked around. The area was surrounded by trees. Some were old with ivy tangled around them, while others were young with thick, flourishing leaves. Others were already rotted, and some had fallen on their sides. It was a quiet place—but going by the way the grass beneath the trees appeared trampled, it didn’t look like the area was entirely devoid of visitors. Perhaps there was someone who still came to visit the grave. After briefly checking the area some more, Jusetsu returned to the cocoonery.

When they got back, they found Shuji standing by herself in front of the room they visited earlier, looking bored. According to her, the other court ladies had gone to another room to take away the cocoon fluff.

Jusetsu told her about how the ghost disappeared at a grave, but Shuji knew nothing about it. It was actually the first she had heard about the burial mound at all.

“The outskirts of the inner palace scare me. As a woman, I can’t go there alone without a good reason...”

This was true.

“I could easily do something to stop the ghost getting in the cocoonery, but...” Jusetsu cut herself off there and thought for a few moments. Simply stopping

the ghost from getting in wasn't going to cut it in this situation. She needed to find the cocoons as well.

"Please. That would be wonderful," said Shuji, prostrating herself in front of Jusetsu.

Her actions made Jusetsu feel uncomfortable. The Raven Consort wasn't a god, after all.

"All right then... I'll start by creating a spiritual barrier for you. We can deal with everything else once we find out whose grave that was."

Jusetsu pulled a shaft with some string wrapped around it out of her breast pocket and then went out onto the outer passage.

"Take this," she said to Onkei, asking him to hold one end of the string.

She then trailed it along the floor and encircled the cocoonery. Finally, she tied the two ends together, completing the spiritual barrier.

This wasn't one of the Raven Consort's skills, but rather one used by shamans, and was a technique she had utilized many times previously. Reijo, the previous Raven Consort, had been the one to teach it to her. It seemed likely that back in the days of the previous dynasty—back when shamans had been able to come and go from the inner palace—this kind of thing would have been their job. They would have most definitely been useful...or perhaps that was an understatement.

Several things that Ui, the keeper of the treasure vault, had said came to mind.

"It acts as a defense against Uren Niangniang in case the worst should happen."

"He said that he couldn't feel at ease unless he had the power to fight back."

There was probably a valid reason why shamans had played such an important role in the time of the previous dynasty.

"Try to avoid stepping on the string as much as you possibly can," Jusetsu explained. "It shouldn't be a problem unless it breaks, but even so..."

After issuing Shuji that warning, they left the room. The court ladies who were

waiting outside got to their knees as she appeared, which embarrassed Jusetsu.

“Thank you very much, Raven Consort.”

“I haven’t done anything significant. Stop making a fuss over nothing,” Jusetsu said. “Didn’t I tell you? If anybody finds out I’m here, it’ll cause problems for you.”

Despite her saying that, the court ladies still refused to get up until she left through the gate. Ever since Jusetsu saved Banka, the court ladies who worked for the Hakkaku Palace seemed to deify the Raven Consort above all else—although she really wasn’t that special.

“Now there’s the issue of those cocoons...”

Once she was away from the cocoonery, Jusetsu stopped in her tracks and turned around. The gentle greenery of the mulberry forest glowed in the autumn sunlight. Here and there, she could see places where the branches had been sheared away, presumably to feed the silkworms.

Locating missing items is my forte, but...

Finding cocoons was a whole different kettle of fish. It wasn’t hard to trace a missing item because of its owner, but these cocoons didn’t *have* an owner.

“Onkei,” Jusetsu called out, looking toward the mulberry forest. “There’s something I’d like you to look into, along with the burial mound.”

“Understood,” he replied.

Something unusual happened that evening when the first watch of the night—the time period between seven and nine in the evening—hadn’t even begun yet. Jusetsu received a messenger informing her that a visitor was on their way.

A boy eunuch arrived at the Yamei Palace. “My master will bless you with his imperial presence shortly,” he announced.

Jusetsu felt that warning her in advance was an unnecessary hassle, but it wasn’t as if she could voice this displeasure to the messenger. Instead, she simply said, “All right.”

The boy eunuch then spotted Ishiha feeding Shinshin in one corner of the room, and a surprised look came to his face. Ishiha made a similar expression back.

“Do you two recognize each other?” Jusetu asked Ishiha.

“We worked together at the Gyoko Palace,” he replied. For a time, Ishiha had been a domestic servant at the Gyoko Palace, where Koshun lived.

The two must have been good friends, because they were both grinning at each other. It was adorable to see it. But then, appearing to remember his status, the boy eunuch hurriedly apologized for his rudeness, placed his arms together in a polite bow, and went to leave. Jusetu placed a few boiled chestnuts that were sitting on a tray into his small hands before sending him away. *If Ishiha likes him, maybe I could get Koshun to make a habit of sending him to announce his visits,* Jusetu thought—but then she began to question herself. Was that sort of idea really befitting of the Raven Consort? She was unsure.

“How have you been?” Koshun asked calmly after taking a sip of tea. Steam gently drifted up from his cup. His tone of voice was subdued, but it had a slight warmth to it—just like the winter sun.

“Same as ever. Nothing ever changes.”

Even Jusetu’s blunt response wasn’t enough to provoke any change in his expression. Eisei was waiting behind him and simply frowned—but when Jusetu looked over at him, he abruptly turned away. It felt a little strange, because normally, that would’ve been the point where he’d give Jusetu a threatening glare. Still, she was grateful that he spared her on this occasion.

Koshun had brought some candied lotus seeds with him this evening, and they sat on the table. He brought these particular treats with him often, and they were one of Jusetu’s favorites.

Jusetu tossed one of the white, sugarcoated seeds into her mouth and stared at the emperor. “What about you?” she asked softly.

Koshun met her gaze, looking surprised. “Me?”

“You asked me, so now I’m asking you. That’s all there is to it.”

“Right. That’s true. Well, as for me...” He tilted his head down slightly, thinking to himself. It was typical of him to give his answer such earnest contemplation. “I’m annoyed that it’s almost impossible for me to talk to the Owl.”

The Owl. Also known as the Burier from the Secluded Palace, who attempted to kill Jusetsu. He also was the Raven’s older brother—the very same Raven that was trapped inside Jusetsu.

“...What do you mean by that?” Jusetsu asked.

The Owl was currently imprisoned for violating the ban on interference. That being the case, the Owl used a large sea snail shell as a messenger so that Koshun could “hear” his voice. Only the emperor could hear it, since he had been blemished by the Owl during their scuffle.

“It seems to be dependent on the tide and the waves. It’s never guaranteed that I’ll be able to hear him when I’m near the shell. It’s not as if I can just carry it around with me.”

If it had been a small shell, it would have been a different story, but the item in question was the shell of a large sea snail. The emperor wouldn’t want anybody to spot him walking around with it, let alone *talking* to it. They might think he’d gone crazy.

“Wasn’t it the Owl who asked us to find a solution in the first place...? What is there to ask him?”

The Owl had asked the emperor to impart some knowledge on him—and to think of a way they could save the Raven without killing Jusetsu.

“Plenty,” replied Koshun. “There must be things that we don’t know that seem obvious to him. I wanted to speak to him more to see whether that was the case...”

“And how am I supposed to know anything about that?” Jusetsu asked.

“You just asked me a question, so I answered you.”

“That wasn’t what I asked about.”

“Then what were you asking?” he countered.

Jusetsu wasn't sure how to respond. What *did* she want to know? What kind of reply had she wanted to hear?

"...I asked you about yourself, so you should tell me about yourself."

"That's what I was trying to do," Koshun said.

"And all you spoke about was the Owl."

"You really are making this difficult," Koshun replied coolly. Then, after a brief moment of thought, he began to speak again. "I, personally, am in the same boat as you—no particular changes to speak of. I've been sleeping well lately, so I'm in good health."

"I see."

Jusetsu wasn't really sure what she wanted him to say, so just gave him a simple response. Still, she felt satisfied now that she heard that. It was probably what she wanted to hear from the beginning. Koshun never willingly offered up anything about himself.

"That said, the head of the Saname clan is paying me a visit shortly, so I'm busy making all the necessary preparations."

"Saname Choyo is coming here, to the imperial capital?" Jusetsu asked.

"Indeed. He's presenting some silkworm eggs to me as a gift."

The eggs would be sprinkled on top of cards and would later hatch into silkworms.

"Silkworms from Ga Province? He's presenting you with eggs, rather than raw silk?"

"It's part of the compensation for what happened before," Koshun explained.

The uncle of the present head of the clan, who'd been under house arrest, had been plotting to regain his authority. Jusetsu heard that in the end, his past wrongdoings and even a murder charge ended up fully coming to light, leading Choyo to behead his own uncle. Since that man had falsified taxes that should have been paid to the central government, the Saname clan as a whole had now been struck with a considerably heavy punishment.

“I desperately wanted to get my hands on some Saname clan eggs, but they were so valuable that they would never even take them off the premises. There was no way I could take them away by force, either. Fortunately, however, this incident provided with me an unexpected way to obtain some.”

In other words, he must have used what had happened to his advantage so he could request the eggs. Even so, Koshun’s expression remained indifferent.

“Did you want them because the raw silk in Ga Province is of such high quality?” Jusetu asked.

“Not only does it have a fine sheen to it, but it’s durable too. They’ve carried out years of research in the imperial court’s cocoonery, but no matter what they’ve tried, the silk that other types of silkworms create just isn’t as glossy as that of the Saname clan’s. The silkworm eggs that I’m being gifted are of the best silkworms that the Saname clan have. Eventually, I would like to merge all of the varieties of silkworm in Sho into one.”

His way of speaking was nonchalant, but he was likely determined to make this a reality. *He doesn’t usually go into this much depth about things*, Jusetu noted. At the same time, Jusetu found it intriguing just how “desperate” he allegedly had been to get hold of these eggs. She realized that the Saname clan’s silkworms must’ve been more valuable than she thought.

“There’s a cocoonery in the inner palace too,” Koshun added.

His words startled Jusetu. The ghost in the cocoonery, and by extension, the case of the missing cocoons, were a secret from him—even more so if they were *that* valuable.

“The silkworms they’re rearing are from the Saname clan,” he continued. “The Crane Consort’s in charge there.”

“Oh, I see,” Jusetu remarked simply, avoiding saying any more than she really needed to.

“Apparently, she used to take care of the silkworms when she lived in Ga Province. She knows a lot about the ecology of them too.”

“Ah...” Jusetu said. Now that he mentioned it, Jiujiu might have said something about that previously. “Is that right?”

“Didn’t you know? I thought you two were close,” he said.

“We haven’t seen much of each other lately.” Jusetu never visited other palaces unless she was invited. At the same time, Banka used to invite her over regularly, but it had stopped as of late.

“Oh, right. I think she’s been feeling out of sorts recently—a few things have been taking their toll on her. You should pay her a visit,” he suggested.

“Is she physically unwell?” The curse came to Jusetu’s mind. Had it had a lingering effect on the young woman?

“No,” Koshun clarified, however. “She seems to be depressed. It started when the weather suddenly got cold. That might be the cause.”

“Aren’t you going to check up on her?” Jusetu asked.

“I have been. We’ve been exchanging letters as well.”

Jusetu should have known. He was a diligent person, after all.

“I’m actually going to visit her after this,” he went on.

“In that case, you should hurry along. I don’t need checking up on.”

“I wasn’t planning on staying very long. I just wanted to see your face.”

Sometimes, things Koshun said left Jusetu feeling as if she were frozen to the spot. At times like that, it was impossible for her to reply.

Koshun then stood up. She stared at his face, but it was just as expressionless as always, making it impossible to infer how he felt. He made his way halfway to the door, but then he looked back at Jusetu.

“Oh yes, I remember now,” he said. “I wanted to tell you about Ho Ichigyo.”

The old man used to work for the emperor as a shaman, back in the days of the previous dynasty. After that, he was hunted down for sending Shogetsu, the Owl’s apparatus, into the inner palace, and had recently been arrested in the prostitution district.

“His fever’s gone down and he’s on the mend. You should be able to see him soon.”

It was unclear if it was because he got rained on when he was arrested or

because of stress, but Ho had ended up sick in bed. Due to his old age, one could not be too careful—not even with the mildest of sicknesses. As such, he’d been moved into the inner court so that he could be monitored and cared for.

Jusetsu was relieved to hear that he was on the mend. There was so much she needed to ask him—both about shamans and about the Raven Consort.

“I’ll be back again,” Koshun stated briefly. This time, he really did leave.

After he did, Jusetsu stood up and went to crack open the door. She watched him and his line of eunuchs walk away. The sun had set, and the light from the lanterns they held wavered mistily in the darkness.

She stood in that spot for a little while, gazing at the lights until they disappeared. Suddenly, she noticed another light approaching from a different direction and strained her eyes to get a better look. That light, which came from a lantern, illuminated the figure of a court lady.

It was Shuji.

Jusetsu went down the steps and made her way over to her.

Once Shuji noticed Jusetsu, she fell to her knees, flustered. “R-Raven Consort.”

“What’s the problem? Has the ghost reappeared?”

“N-no. It’s just...” Shuji was so pale that it was plain to see, even in the faintest of light. Her voice was shaky too. Everything indicated that something unforeseen had occurred. “I would...like you to pretend that the things I asked for your help with before never happened.”

“What?” Jusetsu asked.

“Leave the ghost alone. Please...”

Jusetsu frowned. “What in the world are you talking about? Tell me what’s wrong.”

“Nothing’s happened. Please, forgive me.”

After repeatedly asking Jusetsu for her forgiveness, Shuji sprinted off. It looked like she was running away.

Jusetsu silently watched her go. Something *must* have happened...but what?

The next morning, Jusetsu once again put on her eunuch clothes and headed over to the cocoonery. There was no way she was going to simply acquiesce and step back after Shuji had ordered her to leave the ghost alone—the court lady had looked terrified.

There was, however, a small dispute over who was going to accompany her to the cocoonery.

“You took Onkei yesterday. Today should be my turn,” Tankai had proposed—but Jiujiu couldn’t hold her tongue.

“If you’re willing to take Tankai, then you may as well take me!” Jiujiu countered.

“What do you mean, ‘willing’ to take Tankai? It’s not as if you can act as my bodyguard,” countered Jusetsu.

“I’m worried about you having him as your bodyguard. He’s lazy.”

Jiujiu didn’t seem to get along with Tankai. Since it seemed unlikely that she’d make it out of the door if those two kept arguing, Jusetsu just decided to take Onkei with her and left.

“I’m sorry. I shall give Tankai a scolding later.” Onkei apologized to her on his coworker’s behalf as they made their way over to the cocoonery. “I don’t particularly mind Tankai joining us, but I’m sure it’d turn heads if people saw *three* strangers moving about.”

A voice suddenly cut in from beside them. “That’s why I try to go unnoticed.”

Jusetsu stopped in her tracks, and Tankai appeared from among a cluster of trees.

“You followed us?” said Jusetsu, somewhat taken aback.

“Tankai,” Onkei called out, his voice subdued. As restrained as he sounded, the indignation in it was clear as day. If he were to call Ishiha’s name in the same way, it probably would have reduced the boy to tears.

“But niangniang, being your bodyguard is *my* job. If you keep leaving me behind, then what’s the point? I feel lonely when I’m left by myself too.”

Hearing that he got lonely made Jusetsu feel uneasy. It made her feel as if she’d done something wrong.

She acquiesced. “...I don’t mind if you follow us, as long as you stay out of sight.”

“Of course I will, niangniang. And I’ll be very useful.”

“Tankai...” said Onkei again. His stifled voice was becoming increasingly frosty, but it didn’t deter Tankai. The man instead pretended not to notice and began walking by his side.

Tankai was true to his own desires, and that was even more obvious when contrasted with Onkei, an excessively restrained and unassuming follower. Jusetsu had never had someone like him around before. Tankai was always certain about what he was after and what he wanted to do. That was a trait that Jusetsu lacked. Since it was so alien to her, there were some aspects to his personality that she had a hard time dealing with—but on the other hand, she found it intriguing. She thought that even Koshun could learn something useful from Tankai’s unrestrained nature.

“Onkei, what did you find out about that grave?” Jusetsu asked as they walked along.

“One of the veteran eunuchs knew about it. He said it’s a silkworm grave.”

“Silkworms?”

“Long ago, silkworms that died during the rearing process and the dead pupae that resulted when extracting thread used to be disposed of there. It became a grave where people would worship the silkworms.”

“Like a silkworm burial place?” Jusetsu asked.

“Yes. Nowadays, they sell the pupae off to carp breeders instead, so they no longer need a place to dispose of them,” he explained.

“Why do they do that?” she asked.

“Word has it they make good food for the fish. Every time the silk is extracted,

a eunuch who works at the cocoonery carries the dead pupae out in a bag.”

Jusetsu didn’t know that fish ate silkworm pupae. She figured it was a far better alternative to throwing them away.

“A ghost from the silkworm grave, then,” Jusetsu murmured.

The ghost had made the silkworm grave its home and went to the cocoonery to take care of the silkworms. Had the ghost really been cursed by a silkworm, even after her death? Still, the spirit was too serene for that to be the case.

There was nothing seemingly holding this ghost back. It carried no resentment or sorrow with it. It silently cared for the silkworms, and then it returned to the burial mound once the job was done. It was a quiet ghost.

There was something else that Jusetsu had asked Onkei to look up, aside from the burial mound. “...What about the other issue?”

“There are fifteen court ladies who work at the cocoonery,” Onkei began. “At their busiest, they are accompanied by fifteen additional court ladies. All the women are from the Hakkaku Palace, and that is where they return to when there is no more work to do.”

“They’re not from Ga Province, are they?”

“No. They’re all daughters of merchant families from the imperial capital, local wealthy farmers, or scholar-officials. The main caretakers are the daughters of wealthy farmers, as it’s common for farming families to rear their own silkworms, after all. Apparently, they’ve been taught how to raise Ga Province silkworms directly from the Crane Consort herself.”

“Is that so?” Jusetsu asked. “You’ve certainly done some thorough investigation, considering it’s only been half a day.”

“Thank you,” said Onkei, smiling ever so slightly.

“Hah. Do you suspect that the culprit lies within the ranks of the court ladies, niangniang?” Tankai interrupted. “You’re theorizing that the missing cocoon isn’t the ghost’s doing, but a court lady’s handiwork. I’m right, aren’t I?”

He had good intuition. Jusetsu’s next step was to have Onkei look into the backgrounds of the court ladies who worked for the cocoonery.

“If that ghost was snatching away the cocoons, that should have been the original rumor—but it wasn’t. All the ghost did was appear to take care of the silkworms. There’s also the fact that silkworms from Ga Province—or rather, the Saname clan’s silkworms—are very valuable. It would make sense if someone took advantage of the ghost rumor to steal cocoons.”

“And you think that a court lady who was taking care of the silkworms was able to do that?”

“The cocoons disappeared while they were taking care of them. I don’t see how it could be anybody else. When they noticed they were gone, the workers allegedly searched the room and the court ladies’ robes for them, but I’m sure there was a way they could have kept them hidden. It’s much more logical than the idea that an outsider took them.”

“Does that mean we need to pressure the court ladies for answers?” Tankai asked.

“No. I believe there’s a court lady I need to speak to first.”

“Nen Shuji?”

“Not her,” said Jusetu. “...Onkei?”

“Yes.” Onkei nodded, appearing to understand. “I know who saw the ghost the day that the cocoons went missing.”

A smile came to Jusetu’s face. Onkei knew exactly where she was coming from.

“Are you saying *that* court lady was the one who stole the cocoons?” Tankai asked.

“If it was her that stole them, then it would be easy for her blame it on the ghost,” Jusetu replied.

“And the ghost really *does* exist. I wouldn’t be surprised if it really did appear on that day. What if another court lady took advantage of the commotion over the ghost’s appearance to steal the cocoons? Oh, or maybe they only realized the cocoons were gone *after* that court lady mentioned the ghost? It wouldn’t make sense if so,” said Tankai, now expressing his own answers.

“You’re right. If she had taken advantage of the commotion, I’m sure she would have made a scene when the ghost appeared to divert people’s attention—but there was no such event. She reported seeing the ghost *after* the cocoons were found to be missing.”

“Doesn’t that mean that she was trying to blame the theft on the ghost because she was the one who really did it?” Tankai said.

“Perhaps,” Jusetu replied. She then posed a question to Onkei. “What is that court lady’s background?”

“She’s the daughter of a farming family.”

“She must have some link to a silkworm farming family, then.”

If not, there’d be no use in her getting her hands on one or two of the cocoons—they wouldn’t be able to be hatched or bred.

“I don’t know the sex of the cocoons that were stolen, but if she gets them to crossbreed with silkworms from another silkworm farming family, she’d get some eggs—and not just any eggs, but ones descended from the Saname clan’s silkworms. Alternatively, if the two stolen cocoons were of the opposite sex from each other, she could obtain purebred Saname clan silkworm eggs. That would mean that the Saname clan’s closely guarded silkworms will be out in the open.”

Tankai scratched his head. “...This is getting to be an important case, isn’t it?”

“It really is important. Koshun is currently expecting a visit from Saname Choyo himself. If the cocoons have already been taken away, it will be highly concerning.”

But this, however, was the inner palace. There weren’t many opportunities to contact the outside world. The cocoons were probably still hidden away somewhere inside.

“Don’t you think we should start by informing my master—or no, the Crane Consort?” Tankai asked.

“I shall do that once I’ve confirmed whether this was the doing of one of her court ladies,” Jusetu said. “And I’m worried about Shuji too.”

“Didn’t she come out of nowhere and tell you to forget about the ghost?”

“Yes. What are your thoughts on that?”

“At times like that, there’s just one possibility.” Tankai said with a slight laugh. “Someone must have threatened her.”

Once the group arrived at the cocoonery, Jusetu and her bodyguards split up in two different directions. Onkei started by calling over the court lady in question, making sure that Shuji wouldn’t notice. Meanwhile, Jusetu and Tankai decided to wait for her at the back of the palace building where they wouldn’t draw any attention to themselves.

Changing it up from the day before, they went around to the back gate to sneak in unnoticed. From the main gate, they could see that there were eunuchs working in the palace building at the back yet again. All the doors of that building were open, and the eunuchs appeared to be cleaning. Some were carrying mulberry branches outside, while others were sweeping the floors, brooms in hand.

“This was the mulberry storage room, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. They must be tidying up since they’ve finished taking care of the silkworms.”

Jusetu called out to one of the eunuchs who was gathering some mulberry branches together and bundling them up with string. He was young with a small build and was quite good-looking. Most eunuchs who were selected to work for a consort’s palace were pleasant to the eye.

Seeming to assume that Jusetu was just another eunuch, he gave her a casual reply as he wiped his sweat. “What?” he said.

“Are you throwing those branches out?”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” replied the eunuch, opening his eyes wide in surprise. “We can’t let a single thing in the inner palace go to waste. After all, they belong to our master. These can be turned into dye or firewood.”

“I see,” she said. “And the pupae end up as carp food.”

“Exactly.”

The eunuch put the bundle of branches on his shoulder and carried them over to a spot by the gate. Mulberry branches had been piled up there. *I didn't know there were so many uses for these things*, Jusetu thought as she began walking toward the cocoonery building. There was no sign of anybody near the room where the silkworms had been kept, because after all, there were no silkworms inside anymore. In contrast, one could hear people actively working in the other rooms.

“If they've finished selecting which cocoons to use, then their job today must be extracting the silk,” Tankai said, prompting Jusetu to stop walking.

“Do you know much about silkworms?”

“I wouldn't go that far, but we had them in the family I was born into. It's normal for people with large residences to build cocooneries at their own expense to supply silk for them in our terri—I mean, our region.”

He was clearly about to say *our territory*.

Jusetu stared at Tankai's face. She'd heard that he was a thief before becoming a eunuch, but she didn't know who he had been before becoming that thief. His face was beautiful enough for him to have been made into a eunuch after being caught by the police, and not only that, but there was a sense of refinement to his good looks.

Jusetu didn't know what prominent family he originated from, but she wasn't going to pry unless he offered up this information himself.

“...By ‘extracting the silk,’ you mean from the cocoons, don't you?” Jusetu turned in the direction of the back of the palace building.

“They put the cocoons in boiling water and look for the openings. Then, they pull the filament out. I saw people do it when I was a child, but it takes some real expertise. The pupae inside get killed in the boiling process. You can also kill the pupae by drying the cocoons out, but I hear that doesn't create the same special sheen or something.”

That made sense. There was steam leaking out of the room's lattice windows. As Jusetu was gazing at it, somebody called over to her.

“Niangniang.”

It was Onkei, who had a woman following him. She must have been *the* court lady they were looking for.

“This is the court lady who saw the ghost the day that the cocoons went missing, but...” Onkei looked a tiny bit hesitant, but Jusetsu couldn’t work out why that might be. “...She says there’s something she’d like to tell you about the ghost, niangniang.”

“Oh?” said Jusetsu, tilting her head to one side in confusion. *What could it be?*

The court lady introduced herself as Man Jakusui and greeted Jusetsu with her hands placed together in a sign of respect. Jusetsu remembered seeing her in the cocoonery the day before. The ends of her eyebrows drooped downward, making her look timid. Her soft cheeks were as white as cocoons.

“What is it that you wanted to tell me about the ghost?”

“Oh yes,” responded Man Jakusui humbly. “Umm... I wasn’t sure whether I should have told you right away yesterday, but...”

“Should have told me what?”

“That it was different.”

“*What* was different?” Jusetsu pressed.

Jakusui wasn’t getting to the point.

“Well, you see, it’s just that...” It seemed that she was struggling to be direct because she didn’t know how to say something. Jakusui was moving her hands about and repeated herself impatiently. “The ghost.”

Jusetsu was silent for a few moments. “...It was a different ghost. In other words, the ghost you saw, and the ghost yesterday, were different people. Is that what you’re attempting to tell me?” she asked.

“Yes, exactly. That’s exactly it,” said Jakusui, nodding repeatedly.

What could this mean?

“When the cocoons disappeared, we were working, checking how the cocoons were doing. We check how each of the cocoons are coming along, one

by one, and keep a record of it. These records are very valuable at all stages of the rearing process. We use them as reference for our rearing work going forward, to help us create even more usable cocoons in future batches. As I was focusing on my work, I suddenly sensed that the court lady opposite me wasn't someone I recognized, and I looked up. That was when I realized that I never saw her face before," the court lady said. "I heard about a ghost appearing in the silkworm-rearing areas, so I assumed it was her. I don't really remember what she was wearing or what her outfit was like, but she had a completely different face from the ghost from yesterday. She looked more, how can I put it... I feel like she had a *childish* look to her. She had a sweet face with plump cheeks and bright eyes. Also..." The court lady paused there for a moment. "It was faint, but it looked like she was wearing makeup too. We court ladies don't wear makeup at work—we don't want to get it on the silkworms or on anything inside the room by accident. It's even more important when the cocoons are still forming. If white powder or lipstick were to stain them, they'd be ruined."

"But the ghost you saw *was* wearing makeup?" Jusetu asked.

"Yes. We were very busy, so even when I did realize it was a ghost, it wasn't as if I could bring my work to a halt. And it didn't matter how scary or shocking it was, I couldn't make a sound. I suppose I was scared that it would notice me if I raised my voice... That's how I felt at the time. I tried to watch it out of the corner of my eye, making sure not to look at it too much, but it the ghost quickly moved away."

"It *moved* away? It didn't disappear?"

"It left my field of vision. It didn't disappear in a puff of smoke or anything like that. Everyone around me was standing up, busy at work, so once it disappeared from my line of sight, it blended in among the others. The uproar started after that, when people realized that the cocoons weren't in the frame anymore."

Jusetu thought about this. If this court lady was the thief who stole the cocoons, she wouldn't need to say all this. She could have just insisted that she definitely saw the ghost, and that it was unmistakably *that* one from yesterday. After all, it wasn't as if Jusetu would have been able to know that she was telling a lie. Then it'd be a simple matter of whether she was brave enough to

lie through her teeth or whether she'd have to come clean. The court lady wouldn't have come out with this unnecessary story.

Eventually, Jusetu asked, "Why didn't you inform me right away yesterday?"

"I was worried that I imagined it, which made me unsure whether to tell you or not," Jakusui said. "I was also worried that the ghost would curse me as well..."

"Curse you 'as well'? What do you mean?"

"Oh, umm, last night, there was some ghost trouble..."

"Ghost trouble..."

Jusetu had a realization. *So that's what happened.*

She then turned to Jakusui. "Can you call Nen Shuji for me?" she asked.

"No problem at all," said Jakusui. With that, she trotted back over to the cocoonery.

"Have you heard enough from that court lady?" Tankai asked skeptically.

"I have," Jusetu replied simply.

"You must believe her, then," he said. "Which means..."

"It means that we're now dealing with *two* ghosts."

A short time later, Shuji arrived, looking worried that someone might see her. She was pale. "R-Raven Consort, I told you to forget about..."

"Did the ghost threaten you?" Jusetu asked, getting to the point.

Shuji's eyes opened wide. "Y-you knew?"

"I assume it told you it would impose its wrath on you. Rest assured, that shall not happen."

"I-is that true, Raven Consort?" Looking as if she were about to cry, Shuji tried to cling onto Jusetu, but Onkei stopped her.

"It's fine," Jusetu told him simply before taking Shuji's hand in hers.

Once Onkei had taken his hands off Shuji, the court lady fell to the ground. She cried as she grasped Jusetsu's hand. "Raven Consort, I'm so...frightened."

"What happened?" Jusetsu asked, trying to calm her down. Shuji was now sobbing convulsively.

"It happened yesterday... Yesterday evening. After finishing work, I was walking along the outer passage when something rolled out in front of my feet. When I stopped and looked at it, I realized that it was a cocoon. Then, I realized there were several more cocoons on the ground, further down my path. Just as I was wondering what was happening, a figure suddenly appeared in the lattice window next to me..." Shuji was shaking with fear as she told the story. "It was dark inside, so I couldn't make it out very well, but it looked like a court lady. The figure was standing at my side, facing me. And then it spoke. 'If you get in my way any more than you already have, you'll pay for it.' It was a bloodcurdling, frightening sort of voice. I was struck with terror and scurried back into the room where everyone else was to escape. When I told them I saw a ghost, they decided they needed to go and check for themselves, so I joined them in returning to the spot where I saw it. Then—as you might expect—the ghost was gone, along with the cocoons. Anyway, it was so horrible. I didn't know what to do, so I..."

And that was when she returned to the Yamei Palace a second time and ordered Jusetsu to cease her investigations into the ghost.

Jusetsu had been listening to Shuji's story with her head tilted slightly to one side. She nodded. "I see... How exactly did this 'bloodcurdling, frightening sort of voice' sound? Was it high, or was it low? Was it feeble, or was it a more booming voice?" she asked.

"How did it sound? Hmm, let me think..." Shuji closed her eyes tight, perhaps in an effort to recall it. "It wasn't high-pitched, but it wasn't necessarily low, either... Oh yes, it wasn't a young person's voice. It was hoarse and croaky, which may have been why I found it so scary. It wasn't the voice of a very young court lady, you see."

"Was it a voice you remember hearing before?"

"No... Oh, but then again..." Shuji thoughtfully brought her hand to her

mouth. “Now that you mention it, it did seem familiar. Still, no, I’m not really sure.”

“You said that you went to the room where everyone else was. Who do you mean by ‘everyone else’?”

“The other court ladies... I *believe* everyone was there, but I was so shaken up that I don’t remember clearly.”

Jusetsu peered at Shuji’s face. “Well then, it wasn’t a ghost. The reason I know that is because I put a spiritual barrier there so no ghosts can appear. That’s a definite.”

Shuji stared intently at Jusetsu, as if her eyes were sucking her in. “U-understood, Raven Consort!” She nodded forcefully, her cheeks flushed. “Oh, but in that case, *who* would have done such a thing?”

“It must be somebody who doesn’t like to be scrutinized,” Jusetsu reasoned.

The ghost who threatened Shuji and the ghost that stole the cocoon were likely the same person.

Jusetsu had previously said that there were two ghosts, but one was a fake.

“Could I take a look inside here?”

Before waiting for an answer, Jusetsu went up the staircase and stepped into the room where the court ladies were standing around, working. The air was thick with steam, and a bloodlike stench that accompanied it. Cauldrons filled with gurgling water were set up on the two stoves. Inside these cauldrons, the cocoons were being boiled. The court ladies standing next to them picked up a few cocoons, swiftly located the ends of their threads, and pulled them out. They carried out this task at lightning speed. The threads that were pulled out were then wound up on reels.

Some court ladies were removing cocoons from the pots after they were finished being made into thread, whereas others were tasked with changing the hot water. Others had the job of removing the thread from the reels. The ladies’ cheeks and hands were red from the heat, and there was sweat on their foreheads and necks.

Every single court lady was silently absorbed in her work, and they didn't even notice when Jusetu entered. Jusetu's eyes were drawn toward the basket of cocoons that had been placed in the corner of the room. It was obvious even to the untrained eye that there were some dirty cocoons mixed in with them. They had to be the waste cocoons—the ones that were sorted out from the good-quality ones.

Making sure not to get in the way of the court ladies' work, Jusetu soon went back outside. "Are those the waste cocoons in the corner of the room?" she checked with Shuji, who was standing in the outer passage.

"That is correct," Shuji answered.

"Do they get thrown away?"

"No. We can't use them to make offerings, but we can still take the thread to make court ladies' robes or turn them into floss."

"Were they put there yesterday?" Jusetu asked.

"Yes," Shuji confirmed. "The good-quality cocoons are strictly supervised in another room, while the bad ones..."

"Isn't it therefore likely that those were the ones used to threaten you last night?"

It seemed that it would be easy for anyone to bring them outside as long as they knew where they were kept.

"If so, then who could the court lady who pretended to be a ghost to threaten me possibly be? It's not any of them..." said Shuji, glancing over at the room with the steam wafting out of it. "If it had been one of the ladies I work with, I would have been able to tell who it was—even if it was too dark to make out the shape of her face. After all, I heard that voice..."

Jusetu watched the steam dissipate inside. "...Rather than searching for who it might be, it may be quicker for us to lure them out."

Around dusk, after Jusetu changed out of her eunuch outfit and into her ordinary black robe, she made her way to the silkworm grave with Onkei

accompanying her. She walked around the mossy old burial mound and looked up at the trees.

She could tell that somebody had been visiting this spot the last time she came—somebody had clearly stepped on the undergrowth.

“Niangniang, somebody’s coming,” Onkei whispered.

Jusetsu hid herself behind the mound while Onkei lurked among the trees.

They could hear the footsteps of someone approaching, trotting through the gloomy shade of the trees. These were light footsteps—the footsteps of someone slim and not especially tall. The person seemed as if they were stopping in front of the grave for a moment, but then slowly and quietly crept over to one of the trees instead—a large, old tree with several hollows.

When he put his hand in there, Jusetsu called out to him.

“The cocoons aren’t there anymore.”

Still positioned as if he were about to reach his hand inside, the man turned around, almost jumping into the air. Jusetsu stood up, and Onkei also appeared from among the trees.

“Does my face look familiar? I believe we exchanged words behind the mulberry storage room earlier today.”

The man gave Jusetsu’s face a close look and then went pale. “Oh!” he exclaimed. “You’re not a eunuch...”

The man was the young eunuch who was tying together some mulberry branches and told Jusetsu how they’d be turned into dye or firewood.

“I heard your name is Rijo,” Jusetsu said. She had Tankai look into the eunuchs who worked at the cocoonery, researching everything from their family backgrounds to their wealth. “I know every last thing about what you’ve done. You pretended to be the ghost of a court lady to sneak into the cocoonery and then stole the cocoons, didn’t you?”

When it became apparent that someone was apparently pretending to be a ghost, it became clear that the court ladies had nothing to do with it. If a court lady were to steal a cocoon, they wouldn’t need to go out of their way to create

a ghost to blame it on. As Jusetsu had once suspected, all they'd have to do was secretly snatch the cocoons and then claim that a ghost had appeared.

Rijo was of a diminutive build and had clear, bright eyes. If he was wearing makeup, he'd be able to disguise himself as a court lady with no problem. Once he'd transformed himself into a woman, it'd be hard even for those who knew him to discern that it was him—just as Shuji hadn't noticed it was Jusetsu when she first appeared in her eunuch uniform.

“Uhm... I...”

Rijo's face was now a sickly shade of blue. He was shaking and didn't seem like a particularly gutsy young man. He started to back away, but all of a sudden, he began to run. Onkei began moving immediately, but he didn't actually need to do anything—Rijo tripped in the grass and fell over. Onkei then grabbed hold of his arm and wrestled him to the ground. Rijo did struggle, but Onkei's arm didn't even flinch under his grip.

“Y-you've got this wrong... I just...!” Rijo then began to cry inconsolably. He was a young man, not yet twenty—and seemed as if he'd be equally capable of doing a little bad as he would a little good.

“I know that this scheme wasn't solely your doing. You must have been enticed to do it by one of the eunuchs tasked with carrying the silkworms outside. Did he say you'd be in for a financial reward?” Jusetsu asked. She suspected that asking him in this way might make him confess, and sure enough, the eunuch simply nodded.

“H-he did. But I didn't do it because I wanted the money. At first, it was just some friends having fun.”

“Having fun?” she repeated.

“We wanted to test whether I could get away with disguising myself as a court lady. That was the bet.”

Jusetsu had heard that a small proportion of eunuchs were enthusiastic gamblers. After all, they didn't have much else to do in the way of entertainment.

“So you've been sneaking into the cocoonery? Had this been going on for

some time?”

“No. At first, I just tried hanging around outside, and they’d bet whether the other eunuchs or court ladies would figure out that it was me. That dare went so well that they said it wasn’t even worth betting on—so it then became about whether I could pretend to be the rumored ghost that haunts the cocoonery. But that alone was too boring, so they then bet on whether I could steal a cocoon...”

It was basically a practical joke that had gone too far.

“I was planning on putting the cocoons back right away. I mean, there was no point in *me* having them. I figured I could just roll them back to the corner of the room or something. But then Sekian found out, and...”

“That’s the eunuch who’s tasked with transporting the silkworms, isn’t it? Weren’t you friends?”

“He’s my superior,” Rijo explained. “He told me that I might as well sell those cocoons to a silkworm farming family. Obviously, that scared me, so I said no—but Sekian said he’d expose me for stealing them...and he threatened me, saying that it was a serious offense...”

Rijo began sniffing away, which made him look extremely childlike.

“Due to the nature of his job, Sekian is acquainted with some carp breeders. He said he had an idea about which silkworm farming family would be interested in buying the cocoons. He told me he’d negotiate and sell them next time he brought out the silkworms, so ordered me to hide them away until then.”

“And so you hid them in the hollow of the tree until the silkworms were to be transported outside the premises?”

“I knew about this place because I came this way to fetch firewood for the cocoonery. I figured that the hollow would be the perfect place.”

If he had the cocoons at hand, he’d put himself in danger if someone investigated. Jusetsu therefore guessed that the cocoons had to be hidden somewhere else, and this was the place that came to her mind. While it should have been a spot where nobody would ever venture, a visitor had left their

tracks behind. When she searched the area, she found a cloth parcel stuffed into the hollow of a tree with two cocoons inside.

Today, the thread was extracted from the cocoons, and tomorrow, the silkworms would be transported to the carp breeders. That was why Jusetsu suspected that the thief would come retrieve them tonight.

“Then it must have been you and your helpers who threatened Nen Shuji to keep quiet yesterday.”

“They just told me to stand there pretending to be a court lady again. All I did was stand. I did hear that they were going to give a court lady a little threat, though, and I just assumed it was a prank. The one who rolled out the cocoon and put on that voice to threaten her wasn’t me. It was Sekian.”

Sekian was probably being tied up by Tankai right about now.

At any rate, although it was good that the cocoons had not yet been taken away, there was still a risk that the Saname family’s prized silkworms would then be out in the open. Jusetsu had to inform Banka and Koshun of what had happened, and otherwise leave the matter to them.

Onkei tied Rijo up and Jusetsu left the grave behind her. The area was already completely dark. Then, she suddenly stopped in her tracks and turned around to find a faint light glowing in front of the burial mound. There stood a court lady, facing Jusetsu, who gave her a single bow with her hands placed together in a show of gratitude. The vision of the court lady then faded away and disappeared.

Jusetsu stared at the mound as it once again plunged into darkness. *She can’t have been the court lady who died because of the silkworm’s wrath.* Instead, this court lady seemed like she loved the silkworms. Did she really just appear in the cocoonery because she still wanted to take care of them?

After that, Jusetsu lifted the spiritual barrier in the cocoonery, but—perhaps because the silkworm-rearing seasons had already concluded for the year—the spirit didn’t appear again.

“There’s a tale about a woman who loved silkworms so much that she refused

to get married and was killed. It was in a book written in the era of the previous dynasty,” Koshun said. “It was described as a story that had been passed down from generation to generation, but it may have originally been something that really happened inside the inner palace.”

“In that case, was the marriage she turned down actually an invite from the emperor?”

That must have been why she was killed.

“I’m impressed you knew that such a book existed,” Jusetsu said with a degree of admiration.

Koshun went quiet for a moment. “To tell you the truth, Shiki told me about it.” The emperor was an honest man. “Shiki is familiar with most of the books in the Koto Institute. You just have to ask,” he explained.

Reiko Shiki was a scholar at the Koto Institute. Before that, he’d worked as the observation vice-envoy in Ga Province.

Even Jusetsu had been to the Koto Institute. It was home to a considerable number of written texts, including everything from rolls of bamboo writing strips to paper scrolls. The fact that he had already grasped the majority of them was evidence of that man’s greatness.

Jusetsu and Koshun were standing on the bank of the pond at the Yamei Palace. Eisei was waiting a few steps away, so nobody could hear their conversation. Jusetsu gazed at the surface of the pond that stretched out before her. The distorted reflection of the moon sat on its gently rippling surface.

“You get along well with Shiki, don’t you?” she asked, her soft voice seeming to slide across the ripples on the water.

“I wouldn’t go quite that far,” said Koshun, his voice tinged with embarrassment. “After all, he is my vassal.”

But he wasn’t *just* a vassal. Shiki was probably the one person who could understand Koshun’s darkest depths. They both had the cold flames of revenge burning away deep in their hearts. It was a part of Koshun that Jusetsu would never be able to understand.

Whenever she thought about that, it felt like a smoldering ember inside her. It was as if she was both enshrouded in a fog and sinking to the depths of the ocean. It made her feel insecure and restless.

“...What’s wrong?” he asked.

Koshun extended his hand to touch Jusetsu’s cheek, but immediately moved it away again.

Jusetsu looked up at Koshun.

He’d suggested that they search for a way to save her—a way of releasing her from Uren Niangniang. He said that if there was a way to do that, he’d like to make that happen. Koshun had heard Jusetsu’s unvoiced plea for salvation.

At that time, Jusetsu had unexpectedly burst into tears—and Koshun had been the one to wipe them away. Ever since then, Jusetsu had stopped feeling nervous when Koshun touched her.

He would now touch her as if it were completely natural, with no hesitation or reluctance. Some sort of barrier had been removed—as undesirable as that was.

Jusetsu wished that she could ask Reijo—the previous Raven Consort who raised her—one question.

Is this all right?

Naturally, Reijo would be unlikely to say yes.

The surface of the pond wavered, and the distorted moon became hidden by the thin clouds.

A short time later, Jusetsu heard a new rumor from Jiujiu. The court ladies from the cocoonery apparently were starting to pay visits to that grave. It was now a widespread belief that the court lady’s ghost was the silkworms’ guardian deity.

So this is how gods are created, Jusetsu thought to herself.



The Golden Goblet

A FORTY-SOMETHING YEAR old man with a serious-looking face knelt before the imperial throne. He was so in shape that one might easily mistake him for a military commander at first glance—but this man was Choyo, the present head of the Saname clan.

After being given permission to look up, Choyo energetically delivered his introductory remarks. From his throne, Koshun stared at the man as he listened to him speak.

The look in this man's eyes was as sharp as a sword that could cut a person's bones in two in one fell swoop. Choyo carried himself with a self-important air, and his solemn countenance lacked even the slightest hint of warmth. As a result of this, it seemed that if he were to show even the faintest of smiles, he could charm people to a staggering extent.

Two young men stood in wait behind Choyo—his sons. One of them was around Koshun's age, while the other was still in his late teens. They both bore a striking resemblance to their father, but the elder son didn't look as stern. In fact, he instead had the appearance of a refined writer or artist. The younger son, meanwhile, had a much more daring look in his eyes.

"On this occasion, I have had the privilege of bringing you the very best silkworm eggs that our silkworms have produced."

At his cue, Choyo's helpers reverently held up a tray. On top of it sat paper with tiny seed-like things—the silkworm eggs—stuck to them. Silkworm eggs had a stickiness to them much like glue, so if they were placed on a piece of paper, they'd stick to it without issue.

The eggs on the tray were only part of the emperor's present as the rest had already been taken to the imperial court's cocoonery. There, the silkworm eggs that made it through the winter would hatch the following spring, and the breed improvement experiment would then begin.

If they were able to create a silkworm that produced even stronger, even more beautiful thread, it'd become a valuable asset to the land of Sho—and land a blow against the Saname family, since they had earned their fortune from these very silkworms.

Choyo had spent so many years personally raising and improving these silkworms. How did he feel about them being snatched away by someone else? Had he been able to see this far ahead when he self-destructively drove his uncle into a corner? He probably had.

This man distanced himself from the imperial court, resisted involvement in governmental affairs, and yet still exerted his latent power over Ga Province.

His underlying motives were still a mystery to Koshun. The emperor stared at Choyo's expression the entire time, but he still couldn't discern what the older man was thinking or feeling.

"...I appreciate you travelling so far to get here. Go on to Samon Palace and allay your fatigue."

After leaving him with these formalities, Koshun exited the room. It occurred to him that his old-fashioned word choice made him sound just like Jusetsu. He couldn't help but find it slightly amusing.

Choyo and his sons were planning on staying in the Samon Palace, a detached palace inside the imperial estate, for a short while. Koshun intended to ask them about silkworm raising and Ga Province during their stay. He assumed that if they spoke for a while, he'd be able to develop a somewhat clearer picture of Choyo's true intentions.

As Koshun swayed about in his litter on his way back to the inner court, he wondered if he should go visit the Crane Consort—and inform her of Choyo's arrival.

One day, when the imperial estate was enshrouded in morning mist, one of the eunuchs from the palace staffing department didn't turn up at his post at the scheduled time. Another eunuch who worked with him went to the man's lodgings to call for him.

The eunuch opened the door and took a step into the other man's room, but as soon as he saw what was waiting for him inside, he screamed and tumbled back out.

The missing eunuch was lying flat on his face on the floor of his room with

blood pouring from his head. His eyes were open wide, but he was already dead.

“Niangniang, the rice cakes are ready.”

Jiujiu brought over a bowl full of lightly toasted rice cakes. They had scallions mixed into them, and Jiujiu made them herself. Her birth family ran a rice cake shop, so whipping up these treats was Jiujiu’s forte. They were a great snack, and she could make a large batch all at once. So since more people like Ishiha and Tankai had come to work at the Yamei Palace, Kogyo and Jusetsu’s older servant Keishi had started making them with her frequently.

She got Ishiha to call over Onkei and Tankai as well, and everyone gathered in the room to eat. Keishi was the only one who never attempted to set foot inside the room. That had been the case when she worked for Reijo, and she didn’t seem to have any intention of changing the habit now. With her lips permanently pursed together into a straight line across her face, she was a severe-looking old lady. In truth, she wasn’t angry or grumpy. One time, Ishiha was afraid that he did something to offend her, but she explained to him that it wasn’t the case. After that incident, Keishi started to worry about him. Perhaps he reminded her of Jusetsu when she first arrived at the Yamei Palace as a young girl. She also started serving Ishiha a larger portion of meat than the others, saying it was because he was so skinny.

While the room had previously only had two chairs, extra seats had been brought in from other rooms to increase this total. Sometimes, people would even use divans from the bedrooms. That would have been unfathomable when Reijo was around.

The door facing out onto the outer passage had been left open, and bright sunlight filled the room. Tankai was always the noisiest one when the whole group got together, and he often ended up in some sort of quarrel with Jiujiu. Even Onkei, who was a natural peacemaker to begin with, seemed to be growing tired of doing so lately and opted to leave them to it.

“You know, I wanna eat some of those rice cakes with meat in them,” said Tankai. “The ground meat kind.”

“If you’re going to complain, you’re welcome to leave these ones well alone,” replied Jiujiu.

“I’m not complaining, am I? I’m just making a request. *Obviously* rice cakes are better with meat than without. I’m right, aren’t I, niangniang?”

“I prefer this kind,” said Jusetsu.

These sweet-smelling rice cakes were perfectly browned and crisp on the surface, but they were soft on the inside with a scallion flavor that was just right. Rice cakes with meat in them were delicious too, but they could be slightly heavy on the stomach.

“It’s so unfair how you immediately try to get niangniang to back you up, Tankai,” said Jiujiu. “But I’m right, aren’t I, niangniang?”

“You’re both equally bad,” said Jusetsu.

She quietly watched the two of them as she chewed a mouthful of toasted rice cake. It wouldn’t be long before Onkei took Tankai outside anyway. Trying to talk sense into him in this kind of situation was useless.

At least, that was what Jusetsu expected to happen.

Instead, once the last toasted rice cake left the bowl, Shinshin suddenly started acting violently. Jusetsu thought the bird was just sulking at first because it didn’t get any food, but it seemed like it was more than that. She realized there were signs of life outside the palace building, and it didn’t seem like it was the Yamei Palace’s usual visitor either. Instead, it was a whole crowd of people. The sound of their footsteps made Onkei and Tankai’s expressions tighten, and both eunuchs hastily went out the palace doors, neither of them saying a word.

As soon as the pair was outside, they stopped in their tracks. Even from behind, it was clear that the men were confused.

Jusetsu walked up to them. “What’s going on?”

Onkei stepped aside to open up a path for her.

A group of people were walking over the cobblestones that led the way to the stairs. There must have been about ten eunuchs, all dressed in indigo-tinged

gray robes with swords hanging from their waists. They were members of the Bridle House—an organization under the direct control of the emperor, responsible for cracking down on crime within the inner palace. They were specially permitted to wear swords at their waists.

The inner palace was essentially under the empress' authority, but since there was no empress at present, Kajo—the Mandarin Duck Consort and also the highest consort in terms of rank—was tasked with managing it. She didn't, however, have the authority to investigate or pass judgment on serious crimes. Her rights had been reduced because of the empress dowager, who once seized absolute power and abused it in every possible way. The organization created to handle things instead was the Bridle House, which was under the emperor's direct control. In other words, some of the authority that once belonged to the empress now belonged to the emperor.

But what could the Bridle House possibly want from Jusetu?

The group stopped in front of the stairs and looked up at the Raven Consort. One of the eunuchs, who seemed to be in charge, took a step forward. He had a handsome face, but also possessed the kind of sharpness fitting for the Bridle House, being a group that excelled in the military arts. His skin was pale, perhaps due to exhaustion, and his eyes were bloodshot. He got to his knees and placed his hands together to show his respect for Jusetu, and the eunuchs behind him followed suit.

"Please forgive us for our rudeness, Raven Consort," he said, apologizing for arriving without prior warning.

Those who paid a visit to a consort's palace were supposed to inquire first, but since the organization was directly controlled by the emperor, it wasn't necessary. The eunuch was only saying it as a matter of formality.

"What are the members of the Bridle House doing here?" asked Jusetu.

The eunuch who greeted her looked up and rose to his feet. "Well, have you heard that a eunuch from the palace staffing department was found murdered in his lodgings this morning?" His voice was hard as he posed that question.

A eunuch has been killed? There was no way Jusetu would have known. She didn't know how things were in the other consorts' palaces, but the palace

staffing department was located far away from the Yamei Palace and they had nothing to do with each other.

Jiujiu and the others, who were standing behind Jusetsu, were watching the exchange unfold with bated breath, wondering what was going on.

“No, I hadn’t,” Jusetsu replied concisely.

The expression on the face of the eunuch who asked her that didn’t change in the slightest. “A eunuch who works for the Yamei Palace, named Tankai, has been identified as a suspect in this murder case. As a result, we kindly request that you hand him over to us.”

Tankai...?

“Huh?”

The person who let out this dumbfounded exclamation was none other than Tankai himself.

Jusetsu couldn’t bring herself to react in any way whatsoever. This was simply outrageous. “I...don’t understand where you’re coming from,” she said. “Why is he the suspect?”

“The eunuch who was killed was named Bokuken. I’m sure that name rings a bell, doesn’t it, Tankai?” The eunuch from the Bridle House then directed his piercing gaze toward Tankai.

Tankai’s expression, which was usually so easygoing, suddenly hardened.

“Is that someone you know?” Jusetsu asked.

Tankai kept his lips pursed and didn’t respond—instead, the eunuch from the Bridle House answered for him.

“He used to be a household administrator for Tankai’s family.”

“A household administrator...”

The eunuch continued. “It’s the name for the head servant who manages a household.”

This meant that Tankai’s family were wealthy enough to even employ a head servant.

“You don’t know anything about him, do you?” said the eunuch from the Bridle House. He smiled pitifully, his mouth turning upward. His gaze remained the same.

Tankai had belonged to the Bridle House until a short time ago, but the man standing in front of Jusetsu didn’t seem to have any sympathy for him at all.

Jusetsu gave the man before her a cold stare. “I don’t even know your name,” she said.

“My apologies. I’m second-in-command at the Bridle House. My family name is Shiccho, and my given name is Kon.”

“Shiccho Kon. I don’t believe that the murdered eunuch being a former servant of Tankai’s household is any reason to assume that he was the one who killed him.”

“It very much is,” he replied curtly. “You may not know this, Raven Consort, but the family Tankai was born into was an honorable and wealthy family who had owned territory in U Province since ancient times. Things gradually began going downhill, starting with his grandfather’s generation; their downfall ultimately came when his father was in charge. The primary cause was how his father repeatedly failed in the imperial examinations, and he was barred from becoming a high-ranking official. The family’s fortune dwindled day by day. They’d get rid of one servant, and then another one... Even the most historic and prestigious families can find themselves suffering from that kind of misery in this day and age. Anyway, Tankai was a competent individual, and it would have been nice if the family survived long enough for him to take over...but his father entered a line of business that he wasn’t accustomed to and ended up going bankrupt,” Shiccho Kon explained fluidly. It was surprising he knew so much.

Despite the frown on Jusetsu’s face—or perhaps, not having noticed it—the man continued his explanation.

“While one would assume that the servants would support their master at such a time, the Tan family’s servants were not so loyal. They made off with everything of value and abandoned him—every single one of them. What an *awful* story, don’t you think?” said Shiccho Kon, glancing toward Tankai.

Tankai's face had no expression on it. He simply stared ahead calmly.

"The one who stole the family heirloom, their golden goblet, was the household administrator, Bokuken. Apparently, it was of inestimable value, and losing that was the greatest blow to the Tan family. His father died from illness while in the depths of his despair, and his mother hung herself. The only son, Tankai, was sold to a slave dealer. And not only his immediate family, but also the whole clan were broken up in a similar fashion, and that famous family was no more. I don't know what kind of path he trod after being sold to the slave dealer, but he ended up in a gang of thieves," Kon said with a sigh. "What do you think, Raven Consort? The person who stole that family heirloom is here in the inner palace with him. It's an ironic turn of events, but outcasts always end up in one of two places—as eunuchs or in the gallows. There'd be nobody willing to become a eunuch otherwise."

It was strange that the man was being so disparaging of eunuchs, considering that he was one himself. Indeed, most eunuchs were penniless or criminals who had their death sentences lifted. Without good looks or talent, they would end up as low-ranking eunuchs for the rest of their lives.

Jusetsu snorted. "How laughable. Weren't you the one talking about how 'competent' Tankai was just moments ago? Such a capable man would never make a mistake that would implicate him in a crime. Did you think you could drag *my* eunuch away with such flimsy evidence?" She scowled straight at the eunuch. "Leave. Tankai is staying here."

Kon furrowed his brow slightly. The man had soft and good-looking features. His already fair skin looked unsurprisingly pale, but it was unclear whether it was from the exhaustion this case had brought him or if it was just the way he was.

"...I shall report to Attendant Ei about this. I'm sure he will inform my master as well."

That was Kon's parting shot. He turned back the way he came and walked away from the front of the palace building—or at least, that's how it seemed.

Looking as if he'd forgotten something, he looked back around. "Raven Consort, I don't think you know what kind of person Tankai is. He was arrested

for killing a house servant in a residence he broke into. The man has always been a murderer. If you're going to keep him by your side, I recommend that you be very careful."

A murderer?

Seemingly satisfied that he gave Jusetsu and the others somewhat of a shock, Kon led the eunuchs under his command away from the Yamei Palace once and for all.

After they left, Jiujiu was the first one to let out a big sigh of relief. "That was freaky...! Those men from the Bridle House really are a scary bunch, aren't they?"

"Well, they do have swords," said Jusetsu. Armed opponents always put her on guard.

Jiujiu was furious. "But you held your ground wonderfully, niangniang. It was tyrannical of them to try to take Tankai away on such grounds. And that Shiccho guy, or whatever he was called, he didn't seem very nice either."

It's typical of her to be infuriated by Shiccho Kon's behavior rather than letting the crimes a stranger has accused Tankai of scare her, even if the two of them are usually at each other's throats, Jusetsu thought.

"I've heard that Vice-Bridle Commander Shiccho is an extremely stubborn and ruthless man," Onkei offered. "He takes his work very seriously, and from what I've heard, he'd never do anything out of line—but today, he did seem to overstep the mark somewhat. Tankai, I bet you got on the wrong side of that vice-commander, didn't you?"

Tankai had a sullen frown on his face. It was unusual to see him with such an expression. "How am I supposed to know?!" he snapped back.

"Tan..." Onkei began an attempt to rebuke him, but Tankai ignored him and stood in front of Jusetsu instead.

"Niangniang," he said. "Why did you cover for me? I... What would you do if I really killed Bokuken? Weren't you suspicious at all?"

"No."

Tankai gazed at Jusetsu in awe. “That’s just because you don’t know me,” he said.

“Whether I know you or not is irrelevant,” she stated. “It’s up to me to look at you and make my own judgment. Further still, I have no desire to hand you over to those thugs.”

Tankai stared intently at her. “Even if I’m a murderer?”

“Even if you’re a murderer,” Jusetsu found herself saying reflexively.

Shiccho Kon said that Tankai had killed a house servant. Jusetsu didn’t know whether that was true. The only thing she did know was what kind of person Tankai was—after all, he was standing there, right in front of her.

Tankai looked as if he was clenching his teeth together hard. With that expression still on his face, he spun around and headed down the stairs.

“Tankai,” Onkei called out to him, but the other eunuch didn’t look back.

That night, there was a visitor at the Yamei Palace. It wasn’t someone with a request for the Raven Consort, nor was it Koshun.

“I hear you drove the Bridle House away.”

It was Eisei.

“...So?” Jusetsu turned her face away. “Did you come all this way by yourself just to complain about it?”

Eisei glared at Jusetsu with his beautiful eyes. “My master goes easy on you, so I’ve come alone. The Bridle House receives orders directly from my master, and you should not disrespect that. If there is something you cannot consent to, please place an objection by following the appropriate procedures. What did you think you were doing, sending them away without discussing anything?”

Eisei was the only person who’d scold Jusetsu, and his nagging was irritating. Just as he said, Koshun did go easy on her.

“I did discuss things with them. The vice-commander from the Bridle House—Vice-Bridle Commander Shiccho Kon, I believe he was called—was the

unreasonable one. He tried to arrest Tankai with dubious proof.”

“He didn’t try to arrest him. He was just trying to talk to him.”

“So you do know about this, hm? If he’d been taken away, I bet they’d end up using torture to force a confession out of him,” Jusetu said.

“They wouldn’t dream of doing such a thing,” Eisei countered. “Of course, I do agree that interrogating Tankai at this stage would be premature, and I’ve told Shiccho how I feel as well. He shall not be taking Tankai anywhere unless some new evidence comes to light.”

“What? Really?” *Why didn’t you tell me that to start off with?* Jusetu thought to herself.

A bitter look came to Eisei’s face, making Jusetu question whether he’d been able to read her mind. “Well, that, and the way you ram through and do whatever you feel like are two separate issues. I suggest you reflect on what you have done.”

Jusetu huffed at that. “Why do I need to reflect?”

“Don’t take offense. Acting on your emotions is not a wise thing to do. It won’t work in your favor.” Eisei narrowed his eyes slightly and stared at Jusetu. “Compassion sometimes leads to poor judgment.”

She paused for a moment. “I don’t want to be right, as such. What others feel is right is especially irrelevant to me. It doesn’t benefit me in any way.”

Eisei’s brow was furrowed. “This shall lead to your downfall,” he said. It almost sounded as if he was really worried about her.

Eisei then let out a sigh and left the palace building. Jusetu went as far as the front of the steps and watched as his lantern faded into the distance.

“Niangniang,” someone called out from the darkness. Jusetu turned in the direction it was coming from.

It was Onkei’s voice. “Why was Attendant Ei...?” Unusually for him, he was asking what Eisei had wanted. Even Onkei seemed to be concerned about the Bridle House issue.

“He was just lecturing me. He agreed that it was too early for Tankai to be

interrogated. I don't believe the Bridle House shall be visiting again either," Jusetsu said. "Still, he's so hard to please."

Her final gripe was simply Jusetsu thinking aloud. Onkei reacted with nothing more than a slight smile. Jusetsu looked at him as she thought back on the scolding Eisei had given her.

"This shall lead to your downfall."

"Even if you had—hypothetically speaking—murdered someone and taken refuge here...I doubt I could ever bring myself to hand you over to the Bridle House," said Jusetsu. Without paying attention to what she was saying, she let the thoughts that popped into her mind slip past her lips.

Onkei opened his eyes wide in surprise.

"I don't care...about what's right," she mumbled.

Jusetsu understood now that she had obtained something even more important. If you found something important to you, you couldn't bring yourself to choose the "right" path any longer. That's why it wasn't allowed. When you had something important, what use was being right?

"My downfall...?" Jusetsu's whisper fell into the darkness of the night.

"Niangniang," Onkei quietly called her name and got to his knees. He took Jusetsu's hand as if he was offering up a prayer and bent his head. "When your downfall arrives, I will go down with you."

Jusetsu looked down at Onkei, then let out a puff of laughter. "Don't be so stupid."

She grabbed Onkei's hand too and brought him to his feet. She could feel its warmth. *I have to protect them*, she thought. Jusetsu was the master of Onkei and all the others who worked for her. As their master, it was her duty to protect them.

She then realized something else.

In order to avoid her own downfall, she needed to turn the "wrong" path into the "right" one.

“I’m going to invoke the soul of this Bokuken man,” Jusetu announced as soon as breakfast was over the following day.

“Invoke his soul?” Jiujiu asked curiously.

“It means to summon his soul,” Jusetu explained. “You can only do it once, though.”

“Oh... Is that the thing you did for Hua niangniang?” Jiujiu was referring to the time when Jusetu had tried to summon the soul of Kajo’s deceased lover—although it had proved to be unsuccessful in the end.

Jusetu nodded. “If we ask the man himself, we’ll soon find out who killed him.”

She should have just done that in the first place, when the Bridle House came.

After telling Jiujiu that, she sent for Tankai. While she waited, she took an inkstone and brush out of the cabinet and got them ready. She set the inkstone on an ebony stand inlaid with ivory and jade along with the fine-tipped brush that Koshun had gifted to her, and a high-quality block of ink that was shaped like a boat.

From time to time, Jusetu was tempted to summon Reijo’s soul—but since it could only be done once, she couldn’t bring herself to. Even Reijo had warned her not to attempt it unless it was really necessary. That being said, it wasn’t as if Jusetu hadn’t ignored all of her warnings already.

Tankai arrived almost immediately. He’d had a stony look on his face since the day before.

Jusetu dismissed Jiujiu so that Tankai was the only one left in the room. She announced to him that she was going to attempt to summon Bokuken’s soul. She confirmed that the name Bokuken was correct, then started grinding the ink.

Tankai was bewildered. “Why go that far...?”

Jusetu picked up her brush and dipped it in the ink. “To make it so that the actions I took were correct.”

Doing this would prove that Tankai was not the culprit—and Jusetu, who was

the one to send the Bridle House away, would be the one to make it happen. If she took on that responsibility, nobody would be able to complain.

Jusetsu wrote Bokuken's name on a lotus petal-shaped paper and placed it onto a silver plate. She removed a flower from her tied-up hair and blew air over it.

The flower dissolved into mist and fell open on top of the silver plate. When it touched the paper, it glowed with pale red flames and burned up. The paper had disappeared in a blink of an eye, but it didn't turn to ash—instead, it became one with the flames and immediately transformed into smoke. This pale red smoke drifted around the area like a haze, blocking Jusetsu's vision. Jusetsu reached her hand inside of it.

She moved her fingers as if she were pulling in a thread, searching for the soul. Suddenly, the tips of her fingers touched something cold. It was soft at first, then gradually took a more solid shape. Jusetsu grabbed hold of the cold, somewhat-solid hand tight, and it gripped hers back.

Jusetsu let out a small sigh. She stood up and slowly retreated backward. Pulling the hand at the same time, she hauled a man out of the mist.

The person who appeared was a eunuch around the age of forty—no, fifty—who wore a robe the color of diluted ink. He had a bluish-white face with protruding cheekbones. His skin was scaly, and his eyes were sunken. His gaze was cast downward, and he slouched dejectedly. Jusetsu could tell that Tankai was positively speechless at the sight.

“...Bokuken,” Jusetsu called his name.

The eunuch looked up, startled. “Who is calling my name?” he said, his voice hoarse.

“I am the Raven Consort. Look at me.”

Bokuken's vacant eyes swam about the room for a few moments before Jusetsu's image was finally reflected in them.

An exclamation that sounded like a sigh escaped his lips. “Ahh...”

“I summoned your soul. Are you aware that you are dead?”

Bokuken hung his head. “Yes,” he answered in a voice that was barely audible.

“Were you murdered?” Jusetu asked him.

“The last thing I remember was getting hit...” Bokuken muttered, telling the story bit by bit. “I fell to the ground, and my body wouldn’t move anymore... It was so cold that I felt like I was going to freeze... I suppose that was how I died.”

He heaved another sigh. “It must have been the curse of the golden goblet.”

“What?” said Jusetu in response to his use of the word “curse.”

“The golden goblet... When I spotted it in my master’s house, I couldn’t resist. I just had to get my hands on it. It was staggeringly fine—it was as light as a feather when you picked it up—and had a delicate, intricate flower pattern engraved on it. I knew it was their family heirloom...and I knew about its curse too. And yet...”

“What curse?” she asked.

“They say evil befalls whoever possesses it. That’s why it kept going from one owner to another. In the end, my master’s household went bankrupt, and I died. Even when I was reduced to a eunuch, I wasn’t able to let go of it. I stared at it, night after night, and that evening was no exception...”

“Meaning the evening that you were killed?”

“I hid the golden goblet in my bed,” he explained. “Every evening, when I took it out to look at, I had mixed feelings. Although I regretted stealing it from my master’s house, I was just so enchanted by its beauty. That evening, as I was gazing at it, somebody suddenly hit me in the head from behind. I was so entranced by the goblet that I didn’t even realize the door had opened. The person who struck me picked up the goblet and ran off with it...”

“Wait,” Jusetu spoke up. “Somebody struck you from behind. Does that mean you don’t know who it was?”

“I have no idea. The only thing I could vaguely make out after I collapsed was the person’s robe fluttering by as they left. It was a pale, inky color, just like mine.”

Pale, ink-colored robes were worn by low-ranking eunuchs. The further one rose up the ranks, the darker the gray of their robes was. Tankai still wore his robe from the Bridle House, and it was a grayish indigo blue. Onkei's was a shade of dark gray, and Eisei's, an example of someone of higher rank, was a deep, muted green.

If the culprit was wearing a robe in an inky color, then it couldn't have been Tankai. That being said, if someone suggested that he snuck in dressed as a low-ranking eunuch to put people off the scent, Jusetsu would have struggled to argue otherwise.

It was naïve of me to assume that asking the victim was the solution. However...

The culprit had stolen the golden goblet, and that meant...

"My punishment was reduced," Bokuken continued. "My punishment for betraying my master and stealing the golden goblet. I feel terrible for what I did to my master, and I'm sorry to his esteemed wife and to the young lord too."

He wept bitterly and repeated, "I'm so sorry," again and again.

Suspecting this might be the perfect time to let him go, Jusetsu released Bokuken's hand, which she had been grasping onto. Jusetsu blew onto the mist, letting it disperse and dissolve into the air, and it then disappeared.

"...A master can only be a master when he fulfills his duties," Tankai murmured. "Bokuken did not betray my father. My father abandoned his duties as a master. He gave up everything and brought our whole household down with him. It was my father who was the traitor. Even if Bokuken didn't steal the golden goblet, it would have been given to him in exchange for his late wages."

Tankai stared at the spot where Bokuken had been standing with a face devoid of expression.

"I don't resent Bokuken. He often played with me when I was a child. He was the last of our servants to leave too. If I resent anyone, it's my father...and myself. Having been sold from one slave dealer to another, I was about to become a plaything for some vulgar parvenu. Instead, I escaped and was picked up by the leader of a gang of thieves... Ha ha, thinking about it now, I can't

believe I made it out alive.”

He let out another dry laugh and placed a hand on his forehead.

“Niangniang... My father’s debts left my entire family destitute, not just me. I was in a gang of thieves for about three years, and the last place we broke into was a mansion in the countryside that belonged to a wealthy farmer. We tied up the people inside, ransacked their storehouse, and took only the items of value. We didn’t stay for long. Being quick workers was our selling point. Even on that occasion, I tried to get away as fast as I could. My luck ran out though when I thoughtlessly peeked into the barn. I felt like I... Like I heard a voice. The barn was stacked with farming equipment and straw, and I saw a woman crouching in the corner. The moon was bright that evening, so its light was illuminating a spot through the window. I went up to her and found the young woman clutching her knees on top of a straw mat. Her left leg was chained up with shackles. She was a slave, a house servant. All she was wearing was a one-layer hemp robe, and her whole body was covered with cuts and bruises. They didn’t look like the kind of wounds you’d get from farm work either. Her old wounds had festered and smelled strong and rancid. Just imagining what kind of treatment this girl was subject to made me sick. I broke her chains with my sword’s scabbard and told her to run away—to take advantage of the breakin chaos to make her escape. Then, she lifted her head and stared straight at me.”

Tankai’s voice trembled. His face had gone pale. Jusetu wasn’t sure whether to say anything, but it wasn’t long before he began to speak to again.

“Her face was gaunt and swollen from being beaten, but her face was still there. It was my older cousin. She was...two years older than me.”

Tankai covered his eyes with his hands. “I was speechless, but I think that only lasted a moment. My cousin drew my sword and slit her neck with its blade. A tremendous amount of blood spouted out and she fell to the ground like a heavy plank of wood.”

Jusetu frowned, feeling like she could see the blood pouring out with her own eyes. When she noticed that Tankai was shaking slightly, she helped him sit down on a chair.

“With how she was chained up, she couldn’t even find a way to end her life

herself. I have no idea how long she had endured that horror worse than death. If she wasn't a part of my clan, I doubt that ever would have happened to her... but there was nothing I could do."

Tankai was quivering, engulfed in intense anger and sadness that had no outlet. Jusetu put her hand on his back and stroked it gently. The pain of being helpless to do anything for his cousin felt familiar to her. She experienced the same thing, after all—being helpless to aid her own mother.

"And then...you got arrested and shouldered the blame for a murder you didn't commit," she deduced.

"I didn't care," he said.

"I suppose you saw it as your punishment."

Tankai looked up at Jusetu. The look on his face said, *"How did you know?"*

"I felt that way for a long time as well," said Jusetu. "Although, I can see things slightly differently now."

She thought that the pain she experienced as the Raven Consort was her punishment for leaving her mother to die—but to believe that was to neglect her mother's wishes.

It was easy to blame herself. It made something unfair feel justified.

"So that's why you resigned yourself to this situation too. Were you fine with being punished for something you didn't do?"

Tankai's answer came after a pause. "Yes."

"You fool." Jusetu slapped Tankai's back, making his eyes widen in surprise. "I won't allow that," she said.

Jusetu then hurried over to the doorway. She went outside and called Onkei, and he quickly appeared out of the shadows of the palace building.

"I want to go to Bokuken's lodgings," she said. "Show me the way."

"Understood." Onkei moved in front of her and began to walk forward.

Tankai stepped out of the palace building, looking flustered. "But niangniang..."

Jusetsu stopped and turned around. Suddenly, some words that somebody once told her sprung to mind.

“Reijo loved you. Let yourself be saved.”

Koshun had told her that. His words had seeped into Jusetsu's heart like warm water and stayed there ever since.

“I can't stand seeing you receive punishment for something you didn't even do. I'm going to save you. You may wish to be saved, Tankai—it's all right to want that.”

Tankai stood there motionless, choking up with tears.

Words could have a domino effect—and all this time, Jusetsu had never known it.

The lodgings for the palace staffing department and the low-ranking eunuchs were to the south of the inner palace. Jusetsu headed there, bringing Onkei and Tankai along with her.

“The person who murdered Bokuken stole the golden goblet. That makes it easy. We just have to track down the location of the goblet.”

The golden goblet belonged to Bokuken, and finding missing items was the Raven Consort's specialty.

Bokuken's room was in the corner of the lodgings. It was a small, shabby room, but it was still tidy and clean. It must have reflected the character of its occupant. Only one spot was tinged reddish-black, still coated with blood.

Jusetsu looked around the room. It had been kept so tidy that there wasn't much in it at all. She placed a robe that had been left in his chest on the table, along with some hair that was lying on his mattress. She then pulled a wooden doll out of her breast pocket. With a prepared brush, she wrote Bokuken's name on the doll in ink. She wrapped his hair around it and placed it on top of the robe. Lastly, Jusetsu removed a peony flower from her hair and blew on it. The petals shattered like glass and rained down on top of the doll.

The doll began to shake slightly. Its outline slowly melted away and it swelled

up into a misty cloud. It put on the robe and jumped off the table, starting to walk like a living person. It left through the open door and Jusetsu chased after it.

The robe-clad mist stopped in front of the nearest room, which had to be a low-ranking eunuch's room.

"Whose room is that?"

"I shall go and ask," stated Onkei.

"It'd be quicker just to open it and find out," said Tankai. He quickly placed his hand on the door.

Jusetsu blew onto the doll and the mist dispersed and disappeared. The robe it was wearing fell to the ground.

Inside the room, there was nobody to be found. It was empty.

"...Niangniang." Tankai pointed at the table in the middle of the room. On top of it stood a solitary golden goblet.

Onkei had gone to the palace staffing department to confirm who the room's occupant was. Back in the room, Jusetsu picked up the golden goblet. She was curious what this golden goblet was like, but she understood better now—it certainly was beautiful. It was so delicate and fine that it seemed like it would snap apart if you squeezed it hard enough. A detailed pattern featuring lotus flowers, peonies, and vines was engraved along the outside.

Nothing harmful is haunting this.

Bokuken had claimed it carried a curse, but such things were often the product of coincidences and assumptions.

Still, the beauty of the goblet's workmanship was enthralling. It was definitely the work of a most sublime craftsman, and it was sure to thoroughly charm anyone who saw it. Jusetsu felt like she understood why someone would be so desperate to get their hands on such a thing.

She heard footsteps getting closer, but there were too many to be just Onkei. Jusetsu went out into the corridor to find Onkei accompanied by a number of people, roughly five other eunuchs, all with swords hanging from their waists—

eunuchs from the Bridle House.

They can't have come to arrest Tankai, have they? Jusetu thought. She guarded herself for a moment, but judging by the way they were behaving, it didn't seem to be the case. Instead, all of the men from the Bridle House wore expressions tinged with confusion.

Onkei spoke up first. "Niangniang, strangely enough..."

"What is it?"

Unusually for one as calm and collected as him, Onkei was showing signs of panic. "That room belongs to the eunuch named Shiccho Ho."

"Shiccho?" Jusetu repeated.

"The younger brother of Vice-Bridle Commander from the Bridle House."

That vice-commander's younger brother? "Both brothers are eunuchs?" she asked.

"Yes. I don't know anything about that, but... Shiccho Ho works for the palace staffing department, just like Bokuken did. I went to check on him, but people told me they haven't seen him for a while."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Vice-Bridle Commander Shiccho is gone too," Onkei explained.

One of the Bridle House eunuchs standing behind him interrupted the conversation. "He didn't appear at Bridle House in the morning, and he isn't in his room either. We were searching the inner palace for him..."

And that was when they ran into Onkei, the eunuch explained.

"What could this possibly mean?"

The Bridle House eunuchs were bewildered.

Jusetu showed them the golden goblet in her hands. "The golden goblet that was stolen from Bokuken was in Shiccho Ho's room."

Surprise and unrest spread among the Bridle House's eunuchs. "What does that...?"

Ignoring the half-uttered question, Jusetsu went back inside the room. She searched the floor and bedding and picked up a fallen strand of hair. There was not a single person in the world who didn't shed hair, and it was the easiest thing for a stranger to get hold of. As such, it was a tool for doing magic.

"I shall track down Shiccho Ho," she said.

Jusetsu took a wooden doll out of her breast pocket.

The doll transformed into a bird and Jusetsu chased after it. The bird was flying to the north. Onkei, Tankai, and the eunuchs from the Bridle House joined her, following its tracks.

The group left the partition of the palace that included the palace staffing department, traveled through the plum grove, and ran as fast as they could along the waterways.

Why had the two brothers, Shiccho Kon and Ho, disappeared? Were they trying to escape the inner palace? Or...?

According to Onkei, Shiccho Kon took his work very seriously. Jusetsu only hoped the bad feeling she was getting was incorrect.

The bird circled in the sky above. Whatever it was heading toward was located underneath it. A row of poplar trees and a red arched bridge came into sight. They approached a small stream of water—the stream that ran through the inner palace.

Suddenly, Jusetsu noticed a piece of fine red cloth being carried along from the upper reaches of the stream.

Or...rather, it wasn't a cloth at all.

"Oh...!" exclaimed a eunuch from the Bridle House. He dashed over to the upper part of the stream.

Jusetsu stayed glued to her spot and watched the commotion unfold. There was nothing they could do.

The two eunuchs had collapsed, with blood spewing out of them. One of them had clearly breathed his final breath beside the stream, his chest stained

vermillion. The other was half-submerged in the water, still and clutching his sword. The blood trickling from his lacerated neck was flowing down the stream.

The eunuch holding the sword was Shiccho Kon, which meant that the one with the fatal chest wound had to be Ho.

The eunuchs from the Bridle House pulled Kon up out of the river and lay him down beside Ho. It wasn't clear how long they had been dead.

One of the eunuchs moved away and came over to Jusetsu, pale-faced. "I'm going to call our chief," he announced and ran off.

Tankai stared at the scene with pursed lips. "...Shiccho Kon must have killed his brother, and then himself," he muttered. "I was skeptical about why a vice-commander as serious and cautious as him was so eager to try to arrest me. He must have been trying to cover for his brother killing Bokuken. He was going to get me to take the blame."

Jusetsu looked over at the bodies. "He couldn't bring himself to stick up for him."

"With a character like his, that would have been out of the question from the beginning. He was earnest and inflexible. The very personification of accountability. Well, that's why we didn't see eye to eye. The Shiccho family was another that lost their fortune. Shiccho Kon could've been an excellent imperial official if his family didn't go downhill, but his brother was always a slacker. He figured that if he became a eunuch, it'd be an easy way for him to move up in the world. Or at least that's the rumor on the street, but there aren't too many guys who genuinely want to become eunuchs."

A man *could* end up as a high-ranking eunuch if he won the favor and trust of the emperor or one of his consorts, however.

"His brother was so adamant about becoming a eunuch that Kon ended up joining him. He couldn't allow himself to abandon his brother. That's just what older brothers are like..."

Cold air rose from the surface of the stream. Jusetsu wondered how Shiccho Kon felt as he pierced his younger brother's chest by the waterside. She

couldn't imagine what the final words they exchanged might have been, but she did find some aspects of the situation somewhat understandable.

Jusetsu walked over to the two bodies. The eunuchs fell silent and wiped Kon's damp face for him. That was enough to show her what kind of presence Kon was to the Bridle House.

There was no anguish on the man's face.

He had warped the wrong path in an attempt to make something right—and he'd done it for someone he wanted to protect.

Jusetsu was the same.

She looked behind her and stared at Onkei and Tankai. She now knew that once you decided to protect someone, there was no turning from that path. You could stop on your way, but there was no road leading back again.

Jusetsu took her handkerchief out of her breast pocket and gave it to the eunuch wiping Kon's face. He looked up at her, surprised, then gave her a small—albeit puzzled—bow as he took it from her. He then started wiping Kon's face again, now with Jusetsu's handkerchief.

"...I'll burn a silk feather for him to make sure his soul doesn't get lost on its journey across the sea," she said. "As long as I do that, he'll get there just fine."

It was a mourning ritual. A bird would lead the sorrowful souls on their way.

"Raven Consort...!" one weepy voice cried out.

The eunuchs from the Bridle House all knelt down in front of Jusetsu, and it was a long time before they lifted their heads again.

Tankai watched from a distance as the thin trail of smoke from the silk feather Jusetsu burned drifted away.

A letter addressed to the chief of the Bridle House had been found in Shiccho Kon's room. In it, he explained that his younger brother, Ho, had discovered the golden goblet in Bokuken's possession and was desperate to get hands on it. That evening, Ho struck Bokuken and stole it. In the letter, he wrote that his brother came crying to him, insisting that he never expected to kill him. Killing

another person was punishable by the death penalty. Kon didn't want to let his only younger brother die. Despite knowing it wasn't the right thing to do, he couldn't help but want to save his brother. Even so, in the end, he destroyed everything in a fit of remorse. He killed his brother himself, and then cut his own throat to bring the whole ordeal to an end.

His younger brother was a lost cause, no matter how you looked at it, Tankai thought. He should have just abandoned him.

Still, if Kon was able to do that, he never would have become a eunuch in the first place. Tankai didn't have any brothers, but he did wonder what he would've done if his cousin had turned to him for help. He was sure he would have saved her—even if it meant making an enemy of somebody else. He loved his cousin, after all.

But what about niangniang? What if he had to cover for Jusetsu, making an enemy of everyone else in the process?

"Onkei," Tankai called out to his companion. He couldn't see the other man, but he was sure to be somewhere nearby. "From now on, I'm going to protect niangniang, no matter what."

Onkei silently appeared from among the trees.

"You'll do the same, won't you?" he went on.

"Of course." Onkei's replies were always brief and decisive.

"In which case, we'd better brace ourselves."

"You're the only one who's wavering," Onkei said.

"Niangniang is at risk," Tankai continued, ignoring Onkei's comment. "If somebody's troubling her, we have to try to help her—no matter whether it's a person or a ghost. In any ordinary town, being a good person might be enough, but this is the inner palace we're talking about."

Onkei said nothing. After inferring what it was Tankai was trying to say, he sharpened his gaze.

"There will always be those who regard her as dangerous. And she's no ordinary consort..."

If Jusetsu was another regular consort, they might have still been able to rest on their laurels. Tankai didn't quite know what being the Raven Consort meant, but he *did* know that she could acquire tremendous authority if one wrong move was made. He knew about the Raven Consort's power, and Jusetsu's character.

"Niangniang could rule the whole inner palace if she felt like it," Tankai continued. The signs were already there, even to him. "The eunuchs from the Bridle House are *really* grateful to her for what she did. When eunuchs die, they just get dumped by the riverbank. Nobody mourns them. And this one was a criminal to boot. But niangniang took pity on him and carried out a mourning ritual for him."

That ritual was the final form of salvation, and the soul of the deceased wasn't the only thing it would save.

Jusetsu would extend a helping hand to anyone, whether they were a court lady or a eunuch. As a result, her following was growing in size, without her ever intending it to.

"Niangniang is at risk," Tankai repeated.

"...I know." Onkei looked toward the palace building. "That's precisely why we need to protect her."

Tankai nodded too. The two eunuchs were Jusetsu's first line of defense.

The smoke disappeared from sight. Tankai started to head over to the palace building but stopped. He removed something from his breast pocket—the golden goblet. Jusetsu had given it to him, insisting that it belonged to him in the first place.

He casually tossed it to the ground. He removed his sword from his waist, leaving the scabbard on, and hit the goblet with its chape. A blunt sound rung out and in the blink of an eye, the goblet shattered.

The satisfying sounds of weaving echoed throughout the room.

"The workmanship of the imperial court is just as magnificent as I

anticipated,” Saname Choyo said as he gazed at the brocade that was laid out on the table, which had been woven with three different-colored warps.

“Raw silk from Ga Province was used to make this. The dye takes to it very well, and it’s sturdy and hard to break. That’s why it is possible to weave such exquisite patterns with it.”

Koshun pointed to the woven patterns, ones portraying birds carrying ribbons and six-petalled flowers. They were in the loom room, located inside the court workshop. There were a dozen or so looms in this room, all making repetitive, gentle noises as the workers weaved. Why was the music of weaving so relaxing? The sounds of the workers stepping off one pedal and onto another, of the loom’s shuttle going through, and the sound of the workers pulling the reed toward them... These were all somewhat reminiscent of waves breaking on the shore before making their retreats. Together, it conjured up images of the seashore.

Koshun had given Choyo a tour of everything, from the cocoonery to the loom room. He shunned any guides or followers so he could speak to Choyo directly.

“Thank you very much for gifting me those silkworm eggs,” the emperor said.

“I am very humbled by your kind words,” Choyo said, placing his hands together and meekly bending his head. “I, for my part, cannot thank you enough for the clemency you have showed to the Saname family.”

I showed clemency, huh? Koshun thought, smiling bitterly to himself on the inside. Was Choyo being sarcastic?

“We shall not let the silkworms you’ve put your heart and soul into producing go to waste. We hope to make further improvements and popularize silkworm raising in regions that are not suited for ordinary farming.”

Choyo narrowed his eyes, albeit only very slightly. He nodded slowly, although it wasn’t clear what he was agreeing with.

“Naturally, it is a great honor for me to provide these silkworms as a gift during your time on the throne, Your Majesty. I took a gamble, since it was you.”

Koshun stared at Choyo’s face. “A gamble with what?”

“These silkworms, and my youngest daughter.”

“Do you have your eyes set on a seat in the court?”

Is his intention to get into the imperial court as one of her relatives? Koshun wondered. He was finally getting a glimpse inside Choyo’s mind.

“You must be joking,” Choyo said with a puff of laughter. As expected, his smile *did* have the power to charm people. “I have no such ambitions. Ambition is the beginning of one’s downfall. I would destroy not only myself, but my entire family if I did. Being from Kakami, we must ensure we do not succumb to political greed if we want our clan to survive.”

Choyo’s voice was restrained, and he spoke slowly. His quiet, low tone was still audible beneath the methodical sound of weaving that echoed around the room.

“Do you understand, Your Majesty? Our clan’s destiny depends on my leadership. If I make a false step, the entire clan crumbles. I desire neither glory nor honor, but simply security for Saname. That is all I ever wish for.”

“Security for Saname...” repeated Koshun.

“I have profound faith in your wisdom. I believe that serving you will be to the clan’s benefit, and it is my duty as the present head of the Saname clan.”

How could he prolong the existence of his clan in a foreign land? By not standing out, and by not losing his strength...

Koshun finally understood why Choyo had distanced himself from the imperial court and showed no interest in politics, despite making his own daughter a consort.

The world of imperial officials was one of extreme ups and downs. How many people—past and present—had reached the height of their glory only to fall from power? Ousted or overthrown, a family that was at the top one day could be destroyed the next. In that case, the safest option was to refuse to get involved in the competition for supremacy from the offset.

It was all for the sake of his family.

Koshun wanted to laugh.

Despite seeming to lack ambition, Choyo was, in fact, incredibly self-serving.

“Your Majesty, it’s of utmost importance for me that you establish a stable regime. I intend to do everything in my power to help you achieve that. If there is anything that threatens your status, I shall be the one to eradicate it.”

Choyo’s voice was dignified, but at the same time, sounded horrifyingly cold.

“Niangniang, let’s go for this orange-brown skirt. Your shanqun will be the vermillion one with the gold flower pattern on it, so they’ll go perfectly together. And this reddish-brown belt should tone it down a bit...”

Jiujiu had pulled a number of colorful clothes out of Jusetu’s chest and was gleefully holding them against her body.

“How about a shawl? The light brown one with amber sewn onto it is nice, but this bright scarlet one is lovely too.”

“Either is fine by me.”

“Oh, but that only makes it worse, niangniang! You ought to be at least slightly forthcoming about what you like.”

Jusetu had always just worn her black robe, so she didn’t even *have* any preferences to speak of. Still, she knew Jiujiu wouldn’t leave her alone at this rate, so she deliberated between the two shawls. She picked the scarlet one.

“You like that kind of color, don’t you, niangniang?” Jiujiu seemed happy.

“I don’t have any particular reason for choosing it—I just did. What do you look so chipper about?”

“It makes me happy to find out what you like, niangniang.”

So that’s why, thought Jusetu.

“I’m sure you’d like to find out what kind of things His Majesty likes too, wouldn’t you?” asked Jiujiu.

“Not particularly.”

“Well, you say that, but still,” protested Jiujiu. “His Majesty always brings you *your* favorite foods.”

“That’s just because he’s convinced that giving me food is all he needs to do to keep me happy.”

“Actually, I think you’re right about that.”

Jusetsu said nothing to that.

While Jusetsu had fallen silent—and wore a displeased look on her face—Jiujiu took the opportunity to quickly go about dressing her. Jusetsu’s court lady, Kogyo, stood beside them, carefully folding up the clothes that Jiujiu had gotten out but deemed unfit for the occasion. Kogyo wasn’t able to speak, so she simply watched over Jusetsu and Jiujiu’s exchange with a smile. She was like a much older sister, or even their mother.

Once she finished tying Jusetsu’s belt, Jiujiu went about placing hairpins and dangling ornaments in her done-up hair. Jusetsu stared intently at her in the mirror.

“Oh, was there something in particular you wanted to me to put in your hair? The comb His Majesty gave you, perhaps?”

“No,” said Jusetsu. “Do you like those sorts of clothes?”

Jiujiu was wearing a pale pink shanqun with a light orange skirt. Jusetsu realized she was usually dressed in that sort of pale color combination.

“I suppose so. I’ve never really thought about it, but I do prefer pale colors to deeper shades. Maybe it’s because they’re spring-like? I like spring the most, you see. I don’t like the heat or the cold, and I’m not fond of the time of year when it gradually grows chillier either. It makes me kind of sad. I find it most exciting when you can feel it gradually getting warmer.”

Asking about people’s preferences is actually interesting, Jusetsu realized. If you didn’t ask, you wouldn’t find out.

“I’m starting to understand what you meant,” Jusetsu commented.

“About what?”

“Finding out what other people like is fascinating.”

“Oh my!” Jiujiu let out a cheerful chuckle. It felt like the sunlight on a spring day. “It is, isn’t it?”

“Also, I feel like I’ve gained something,” she continued.

“Gained something?”

“I feel like I know you better than I did before.”

Jiujiu blinked over and over again, her eyes—with their large, dark irises—like those of a small bird. “Are you feeling happy too, niangniang?”

“Happy?” Jusetu repeated. “...Right. Yes, I suppose I do. Perhaps this feeling *is* happiness.”

Jiujiu giggled, covering her mouth with her sleeve. “I’m happy too, for making you feel that way.”

Jiujiu always had a clear grasp of her own feelings, and it was something that Jusetu lacked. Jusetu was always confused by how she felt and was constantly fumbling for answers.

Seeing the other woman’s cheerful smile warmed Jusetu’s heart, but she still couldn’t be sure whether the emotion she felt was happiness or something else.

“All right, all done. Let’s go.” Jiujiu stared at Jusetu, who was now all dressed up, seemingly satisfied. She then guided Jusetu towards the doorway.

Jusetu was getting changed in order to go on an outing to visit the Hakkaku Palace—to check up on Banka. However...

“Uhm, niangniang...?”

Ishiha, who’d been taking Shinshin on a walk outside, opened the door and poked his head inside. There was a somewhat bemused look on his face, and he clutched Shinshin against his chest.

“You have a visitor...” he continued.

“A visitor?”

A eunuch appeared from behind him and unhesitatingly came inside...or rather, it looked like a eunuch.

“I sneaked out of the Hakkaku Palace because I wanted to see you.” Instead, the visitor was Banka, dressed as a eunuch. “If I paid you a formal visit, I’d have to bring along my ladies-in-waiting and eunuchs. That’s a bit over-the-top, don’t

you think?”

Banka laughed mischievously. Koshun previously told Jusetu that she was depressed, but she seemed surprisingly well—although her cheeks were very slightly sunken.

Despite being taken aback by Banka’s unexpected visit, Jusetu had Jiujiu and the others prepare some tea. She offered Banka a seat and sat down opposite her.

“I was just about to come and visit you,” Jusetu said.

“Oh my, were you really? I’ve always wanted to try sneaking out though, just the once. Do you think it suits me? When I heard that you walk around pretending to be a eunuch sometimes, I wanted to try it myself.”

“Well... I think it looks good on you.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” Banka’s voice was cheerful—almost too cheerful. It actually made Jusetu feel more worried about her.

“How’s your health?” Jusetu asked. “I hope you’re not pushing yourself too hard.”

“It’s all right. I’m totally fine, physically. I just feel a little blue every now and then.”

Jusetu was hesitant. “Well, if you’re telling the truth, then that’s a relief to hear. Make sure to eat warm food and take care of yourself.”

“Yes, I will,” said Banka. “Oh, I wanted to thank you for your help. With the cocoon thing, I mean.”

She was talking about the recent commotion over the stolen cocoons.

“Thanks to what you did, it wasn’t a problem. If the Bridle House was mobilized and we had a manhunt, we wouldn’t have been able to keep it quiet. There’s a chance that my father never would have gone through with gifting the emperor those silkworm eggs.”

The case had been dealt with discretely. It wasn’t made public out of fear that it would deteriorate the relationship between the imperial estate and the Saname clan—although Choyo had probably gotten wind of it, anyway.

“You know, I’m going to give you some fabric woven with the raw silk we just made as a thank-you present! It’s in the process of being woven,” said Banka.

“Wasn’t it supposed to be for Ko—I mean, the emperor?”

“Some of it will be for him, but I’m weaving another measure of it myself.”

“You are?” Jusetu asked.

“Yes. I’m not especially good at weaving, but I’d like you to accept it. Would you do me the pleasure?”

Banka sounded like she was pleading, so Jusetu nodded.

“All right...”

“Wonderful,” said Banka. “I’ll do my very best.”

As always, the girl gave off a sense of emptiness despite her unaffected exterior. *I wonder if she’s really all right*, Jusetu thought.

Jusetu tried to pry a bit. “...There isn’t anything troubling you by any chance, is there?”

Banka closed her mouth for a moment and blinked. Jusetu wondered if she was going to cry, but she didn’t—even though she looked like she would.

“Oh no, nothing’s troubling me.” Banka laughed. “Still, I suppose there *is* one thing on my mind... My father’s here at the moment. Did you know that?”

“Oh, I remember hearing that.”

“I should get the opportunity to see him, but I’m feeling reluctant to. He’s a stern man.”

“You don’t have to see him,” Jusetu said—but Banka just giggled, as if she found her comment amusing.

“But I *want* to see him. He’s my father. Perhaps he’ll even have something nice to say about me... Hopefully, I won’t be in trouble,” Banka said, sounding like she was talking to herself. She lowered her gaze before quickly looking back up again. “Oh, I almost forgot. Apparently, my older brothers have come along too.”

“Oh?” Jusetu vaguely remembered hearing about them before.

“My eldest brother and my third-eldest brother—he’s the one closest to me in age. I talked about them before, haven’t I?” Banka said with a chuckle. “My eldest brother is the bossy one, while my third-eldest brother is the mean one. They’d be so furious if they knew I said such things about them! You see, my second-eldest brother is the best of a bad bunch. He’s the most like my father. He’s not bossy and he’s not mean, but you can never tell what he’s thinking. I expect the fact that he was left behind in Ga Province is a sign that my father trusts him the most. There are rumors that he’ll be my father’s successor.”

Is it really appropriate for her to be sharing such private information? That fleeting thought came into Jusetu’s head, but all she said to Banka was, “Is that so?”

“Hey, Jusetu...” Banka’s voice became a whisper, and the smile was gone from her face. “Watch out for my father.”

Jusetu frowned, but before she had a chance to ask what she meant, Banka stood up.

“I’m going to head back now—before my ladies-in-waiting notice I’m gone.”

The Crane Consort spun around and airily walked out of the palace building. Her footsteps were so light that it made Jusetu worry if the woman weighed anything at all.

A young man with a beautiful face walked down a passage, his loud footsteps resounding as he did so, and went inside a room. His long robe—bright and blue like an Asiatic dayflower—suited him perfectly. His strength and aggressive nature were apparent in his eyes, which was both his fault and his appeal. His eyes were always shining, as if there were stars inside of them.

“Dear brother, where can I find our father?”

“In the back room. He appears to be writing a letter of some sort,” Shin replied calmly. He had been drinking tea in the room his brother had just entered.

Saname Shin was the eldest of Choyo’s sons. He was dressed in a long robe the austere color of misty moss, a favorite of those with refined tastes. There

wasn't a single hint of his brother's combativeness nor the shrewdness of his father in his gaze. It instead exuded his pride in being the heir apparent to a powerful and historic family, and his tight-lipped mouth was a reminder of the sternness inherited from his father.

"A letter? Who could he possibly be writing a letter to at a time like this?"

"I do not know. Don't pry into every little thing our father does, youngest brother."

Ryo, Choyo's third son, frowned and gave his brother an icy-cold glare. His emotions showed on his face immediately, which was an unfavorable tendency of his. *It's about time he left his childish ways behind*, Shin, the older brother thought. But Ryo was who he was, and he—for one—found Shin to be very arrogant.

"I should have stayed behind in Ga Province. It's unbearably boring here," said Ryo as he flopped into a chair.

Shin didn't agree. The Samon Palace—the detached palace been given to the Saname group to stay in—was a stunningly beautiful place with eye-catchingly bright vermilion-lacquered pillars, exquisitely crafted hanging lanterns, and decorative fretwork on the openwork screens above the inner doorways. The black lacquered furnishings had beautiful mother-of-pearl inlays, and everything from the silver trays to the glass drinking vessels were, without exception, examples of exquisite craftsmanship. People said that the court workshop was where the country's very best craftsmen gathered, and the Saname family felt like they were now seeing evidence of that with their own eyes.

"You were the one who insisted on coming despite being told that it wasn't required. You're too old to be complaining like a child."

"Hmph." Ryo turned his face away. He was annoyed. "Don't you find it frustrating, though? We've already supplied so much of our rice and silk to them, and now they've gone as far as taking our silkworm eggs."

"They haven't 'taken them,' they were a gift to the emperor. We're lucky that was all we had to sacrifice. If there had been a cutthroat emperor in charge, our entire clan may have been executed."

To dodge taxes owed to the imperial court was to disobey the emperor. The clan could have been charged with treason. Their great uncle was the one they should have felt resentment toward, not the emperor.

“We have no army,” Shin said. “Our weapons are wealth and wisdom. We can’t keep our silkworm eggs hidden from the world forever. If we had let this opportunity pass us by, they may have taken them from us by force. Our father acquiesced at the wisest possible occasion and ingratiated himself with the emperor.”

Ryo went quiet at that, looking disgruntled.

“Oh, please,” Shin said with a sigh.

His youngest brother was the one who inherited the most of his late mother’s beauty, but he also possessed her same unyielding spirit.

“...Do you always believe everything our father does is right?” Ryo said.

“You’re misunderstanding me slightly,” Shin argued. “Our father would never do anything that would disadvantage the Saname family.”

“When all is said and done, that still means you would obey our father in everything he does, doesn’t it?”

“Of course, I would.”

Saname folk respected their elders above all else. His father’s word was the be all and end all. It was a rule that was ingrained in him.

“In that case, if our father said that our middle brother was going to be the one to succeed him, would comply?”

Their middle brother—Choyo’s second son.

Shin scowled at Ryo.

Ryo averted his gaze. “...I’m *worried*, Shin,” he said. “What is our father planning to do?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Surely he’s not going to offer up our silkworm eggs, take a simple sightseeing tour of the imperial estate, and then make his way home. He has something up

his sleeve,” said Ryo.

Ever since Ryo was little, he had an exceptionally intuitive and sensitive side to him—so much so that he caused his nannies quite a lot of trouble.

The image of his father writing a letter with his back turned away from him popped into Shin’s mind. His father never did anything that would waste his time. *Who could that letter have been for?*

“...I’m not sure either, but our father always operates with our clan in mind,” replied Shin. “There’s no cause for concern.”

“He never consults us about a single thing,” Ryo said slowly and softly. “Not a single thing.”

Shin knew that too. Their father had not once looked to them for help.

*The
Ink's
Revelation*

KOSHUN CALMLY placed his finger on top of the Go board, making a tapping sound. "If you don't place a stone here now, this one won't be saved."

Jusetsu pointed at a different place on the board. "But if I place one here..."

"You'll lose even more stones, and then lose more and more of your territory. The aim here is to capture territory, so you should avoid making spur-of-the-moment moves. Instead, think ahead, step by step."

"Ugh," went Jusetsu, frowning. Playing Go was difficult.

"It requires experience and intuition. You'll get the hang of it as time goes on."

Jusetsu leaned back in her chair. "I'll be an old lady by the time I get the hang of this."

Koshun let out a little laugh. "We should carry on playing even when we're both elderly."

"...You can't imagine me winning even then, can you?"

"No... Well, you never know."

Koshun had definitely been about to say that Jusetsu wouldn't be able to beat him, even when the two of them were both old and gray. Jusetsu found the emperor to be surprisingly competitive. He may have always had a calm look on his face when the two of them were playing together, but that was just because he never expected her to be able to win.

Even when we're both elderly...

Jusetsu had never even thought about getting old before. She didn't like the idea of it. Even if she did manage to survive to that age, all she could imagine was pain.

"I've brought you some tea."

Jiujiu arrived, accompanied by the fragrance of tea. Jusetsu and Koshun moved from beside the window, where the Go board was laid out, and went over to the table. The fish-shaped decorations hanging from their waists swung in unison.

“This is the tea from Bu Province that His Majesty kindly presented to us. It has a lovely aroma to it, don’t you think?”

True enough, the scent lingering in the gentle steam from the pot was clear and distinctive. The tea’s warmth offered relief from the cold night air’s chill on their skin. Toasted rice cakes with jujube filling had also been laid out—snacks that Koshun had brought. He still hadn’t quashed his habit of bringing food with him.

“You seem to like lotus seeds, so I wasn’t sure whether you’d prefer lotus seed or jujube filling. Would the lotus seed ones have been better?”

“While I do enjoy lotus seeds, these are delicious in their own way,” Jusetsu said. “I have no complaints.”

Lotus seed paste was soft, and jujube paste was both sweet and sour. Both were tasty. Koshun looked pleased with himself as Jusetsu enthusiastically ate her way through them. As much as it pained Jusetsu to give Koshun the reaction he hoped for, delicious things were delicious—and she just couldn’t help it.

“I’ll give the leftovers to Jiujiu and the others. Ishiha has already gone to bed, so he can have some tomorrow.”

Just as Jusetsu was about to have the tray taken away, Koshun said, “I had a separate portion for them made and sent into the kitchen already.”

“You’re well-prepared.”

“Well, there are more people here than there used to be.” Koshun looked around the room. Only the two of them were there at the moment, but in the daytime, it would get fairly lively.

“You’re partially to blame for that,” said Jusetsu. “You kept insisting that I take on more staff.”

“Considering this is the palace of a consort, you’re *still* low on staff...” Koshun said. “Have you got enough help here?”

“Plenty. Tankai keeps saying I need more bodyguards, but I think that’s just because he’d prefer to slack off. Onkei assures me that two is sufficient. The more isn’t the merrier when it comes to bodyguards, he says.”

“Is that so?” Koshun stared at Jusetsu, looking slightly surprised.

“What is it?”

“Nothing... I just never expected you to be on such friendly terms with your bodyguards,” he replied. “You were hesitant about having more people around you, so that came as a surprise.”

Jusetsu looked away. Reijo had instructed her never to take on any court ladies or eunuchs. The Raven Consort was supposed to be a solitary being. Jusetsu, however, had ignored that advice and felt somewhat guilty about it.

Even so...

“...Once I had them by my side, I decided that I would protect them, as their master. You said that too, did you not? Once you extend a helping hand to somebody, you should make sure they’re taken care of until the very end.”

Some time ago, when Jusetsu was waffling about whether to welcome Ishiha into the Yamei Palace, Koshun had told her something.

“You should have people around you that you give love to as well. It doesn’t matter if it’s just one or two people, or however many you want.”

She was gradually starting to understand what that meant.

“I thought that having people around you would make you weaker, but that’s not the case.”

Attendants didn’t protect their master—they made them stronger. Jusetsu had to be strong in order to protect them. She had to be like a big tree—standing tall and not falling down, no matter what happened.

Koshun narrowed his eyes, as if dazzled by a bright light. “I’m glad you’re now able to see things that way, although it does make me feel a bit lonely.”

“Lonely? Why?” asked Jusetsu.

“Well...” Koshun tilted his head to one side, his face lacking in expression. “I suppose it’s like watching a baby chick leave the nest.”

“Which one of us is the baby chick?”

“Perhaps that wasn’t quite the right analogy. Let me think...” replied Koshun,

putting some very serious thought into it. “I suppose I find it somewhat tiresome that you’re becoming close to more and more people besides me...”

Jusetsu stared intently at Koshun’s face. “Tiresome?”

“I feel like you’ve been snatched away from me,” he explained.

“I’m not an object, you know.”

“I know, but I can’t help that being the way I actually feel. Have you never felt that way before?”

“N...” Jusetsu had almost said “no,” but she stopped herself. *No, wait... Lonely and bored...* A face suddenly sprung to mind.

It was Reiko Shiki.

Jusetsu said nothing.

While Jusetsu was sitting there in silence, Koshun apologized.

“What I just said was irrational. I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t even understand what I was trying to say myself. Forget about it.”

Before Jusetsu could talk about the gloomy feeling that thinking about Koshun and Shiki had given her, Koshun brought the topic to a close.

An abnormally long silence fell between them. Drums rang out in the distance to announce what time it was.

“It’s about time I went on my way...” Koshun stood up from his seat. “Is there anything you’d like me to bring on my next visit?”

“No.”

“There must be some things you’re going to need, considering you have more people here now. If there’s anything I can help with, send me a letter.”

“Kajo brings me most of it. Books, brushes, inkstones—all before I even tell her anything.”

“Oh, I see...” said Koshun, trailing off. “She’s outdoing me. I’m no match for Kajo when it comes to intuition. What do I do?”

“It’s not a competition.”

“At the end of the day, I’m no use to you, aside from bringing you good food,” Koshun said. His face remained expressionless, but he sounded somewhat disappointed.

Jusetsu found him strange—he should have just gone and brought a flower to one of his other consorts instead of worrying himself over her.

“I like food the best,” she said.

“Is that right?” Koshun responded with a smile.

He then opened the door to find Eisei waiting for him outside. Lately, Eisei hadn’t been coming inside the palace, and instead waited right outside the doors. Jusetsu didn’t know why this was. The eunuch kneeled to Koshun, taking no notice of her whatsoever.

“Let us return to the Gyoko Palace,” Koshun said to him.

Eisei lit his candlestick and began walking ahead of the emperor. Jusetsu remained in place, watching the two of them walk away—although she wasn’t really concentrating on it at all. This had sort of become a habit of hers, to watch the light disappear into the distance as Koshun was going home.

We should carry on playing even when we’re both elderly.

As she watched the light flicker, Jusetsu ruminated over Koshun’s words. He was saying that the two of them would still be the same, even as an old woman and old man.

The words Koshun rattled off had lit her way. The things he casually said always had that power over her. Gradually, a path was beginning to emerge ahead, through the darkness that Jusetsu never thought she’d be able to see through.

The light that was faintly illuminating Koshun and Eisei’s silhouettes steadily got further away.

The last remnants of the hot season were fading away, and it was getting colder with every passing evening. The darkness seemed to be becoming clearer and sharper. The viscous, stagnant, dense nights that summer had brought were now nowhere to be found. The darkness at this time of year may have

been perfectly clear, but all you could see through it was more darkness. The clearer the darkness, the purer it was. It blended in with the night air, and every time Jusetsu took a breath in, it felt like it was seeping into her heart.

By the time their light disappeared, Jusetsu's robe had absorbed the darkness around her, making it feel heavy and cold.

The flame at the candlestick's tip wavered. As Eisei used this flame to illuminate the way ahead, his own feelings were also wavering.

"Eisei, you don't have to wait outside. It's not as if the conversations we have are particularly confidential."

"Understood..."

Koshun *said* that, but Eisei couldn't stand being there when he didn't know how to view her. He never expected to feel this way. There was a chance Jusetsu could be his half-sister—and it was nothing more than that—but yet as time went on, that thought began to weigh heavily on his heart.

Who knew that blood ties were this strong?

It probably felt this way because Eisei was a eunuch. His mother and father had already died, and he wouldn't be able to continue his bloodline. Until now, he always believed that blood ties were irrelevant. Although Eisei had Koshun, a master worthy of his devotion, he hadn't been able to shake the feeling that he'd be all alone in the world once he left his position as an attendant.

But now, there was a chance he had a sister. It made Eisei feel shaken and lost, as if there were stormy waves raging about inside his heart.

Yet that girl is nothing but a danger to my master.

She wasn't just the Raven Consort—she was also a surviving member of the previous dynasty.

Koshun wasn't supposed to get too close to her. He had his qualms about them being friends, but what if they became more than that...? Eisei couldn't get that fear out of his head.

Eisei glanced behind him. Did Koshun realize it? Was he aware that he gave

Jusetsu looks he had never given to anybody else? Eisei sensed that the emperor now felt something that went beyond friendship and romantic love. That feeling was something enormously significant—and he couldn't help but feel frightened.

Shiki found the musty smell of ink strangely calming. He removed a bamboo scroll from the shelf and slowly breathed in the scent.

The Koto Institute's historical archive consisted of a great hall and several small rooms, all of which were libraries. There were other libraries inside the imperial estate grounds, so the collection of books here was enormous. Some of the historical archives focused on compiling historical texts, others held collections of family legends, local histories, and topographies from around the country, and there were even others where old copies of official documents were stored. All the texts were originally collected for the purpose of compiling historiographies, but since the days of the previous dynasty, policies had declared that written texts were precious assets, and so they were still being collected and stored to this day—regardless of their type and land of origin.

This collection of books was said to have begun when the first emperor of the previous dynasty ordered topographies and fictional short stories from all over the country to be given to him as gifts. Since those who presented them to him received prized silks as a reward, the emperor collected tales with great enthusiasm and in large numbers.

At the present time, this historical archive was home to various texts, ranging from ancient decrees to manuscripts from numerous foreign lands. While some were written on bamboo scrolls, a number of them were even printed on silk. The texts were sorted by type and stored in their own separate stack rooms. In particular, ancient texts that had been collected, transcribed, and compiled with the assistance of several of the emperors from the previous dynasty—having seemingly been left to rot in the dusty corner of a stack room—were particularly valuable when it came to learning about the customs of the past.

“Reiko, tell Chief Secretariat Ka to bring this as well.”

An apprentice scholar appeared and passed Shiki a piece of paper. Ka Meiin,

recently instated in the role of chief secretariat, worked people very hard. Shiki knew better than anyone which texts could be found in which stack room, so he was often issued orders like this. Meiin was the one who put Shiki forward to become a scholar, and he was letting him lodge with him for nothing, so Shiki couldn't disobey him. He had actually been intending to move once things settled down, but Meiin had let him stay, insisting that the room would only be empty, anyway.

Shiki figured it was partially so Meiin could keep an eye on him and make sure he wasn't getting up to anything strange. Meiin probably didn't trust him completely and was suspicious of his connections to Saname Choyo.

In reality, however, Shiki had just been taken advantage of.

Shiki had fled Ga Province after being poisoned by Choyo's uncle. Choyo wouldn't have let Shiki get away alive if he didn't want to. Shiki was allowed to get away unscathed, presumably so that he could inform the central government of his suspicions regarding the Saname clan. It would work out for the best if word about the Saname clan's evil deed got around before Choyo got rid of his uncle. Then, he'd be able to tell his uncle that His Majesty already knew about the attempt to poison the observation vice-envoy.

Shiki found Meiin aggravating. He was the one who was nearly killed, and yet Meiin had the audacity to be suspicious of *him*? It just added insult to injury.

And then there was Hakurai, from the Eight True Teachings.

Could Choyo have been connected to the Eight True Teachings as well? Or was Choyo's uncle the only one who had links with them?

Every time Shiki thought about the founder of the religion, he felt a chilly sensation in his chest, as if a shadow had suddenly fallen over him. The thought of that man stirred up a dark loathing inside of him. It was that man's fault that Shomei, his younger sister, was dead.

The predecessor to the Eight True Teachings had been a religion called the True Teachings of the Moon. The family Shomei married into had been believers of it, and they were the ones who beat her to death. It was Hakurai who had incited them to do so. Everyone from her husband's family had been executed, yet Hakurai was still living out his life.

Whenever he thought back on the tragic sight of Shomei's corpse, his whole body felt as if it were shaking with rage. No amount of hatred could ever be enough.

Startled, he glanced at his right arm. There was a pale hand clutching at his sleeve—a woman's hand, frail and helpless.

Shiki closed his eyes, exhaled, and looked at his sleeve again. The hand was gone.

The pale hand would appear now and then, as if in an attempt to discourage his hatred. As long as Shiki detested Hakurai, his sister's soul wouldn't be able to make it over to paradise. Shiki wanted to allow her to rest, but he also couldn't get rid of the loathing inside of him.

Why won't she let me hate him?

"...Hello there. Are you alright?"

Hearing a woman's calm voice, Shiki turned around.

A beautiful woman was standing there, dressed in a jade-colored shanqun with a mint green skirt. It was the Mandarin Duck Consort, Un Kajo. She was accompanied by her ladies-in-waiting and eunuchs, all who stood behind her. Shiki had seen her here before, as she visited every now and then to borrow reading materials.

"...My apologies, esteemed Mandarin Duck Consort." Shiki got to his knees and bowed.

"Please, do stand up," she said before adding worriedly, "I take it that something is wrong?"

"Oh, I'm fine—just slightly sleep-deprived."

"Well, that's not good," she said. "Sleep deprivation ruins your health. You shouldn't write it off as something insignificant. I recommend taking a strong decoction."

"I will... Thank you very much for your concern."

Shiki placed his hands together in respect and waited for Kajo to leave—but the mint green skirt in his field of vision didn't move. He could clearly see the

circular pearl pattern that was embroidered on it in silver thread. Being the emperor's top consort, her elegant and understated attire without a single hint of gaudiness spoke volumes about her intellect. But why wasn't she going away? There must have been some texts she wanted to look for.

"You were from Reki Province, weren't you?" she asked. "How long were you there for?"

Shiki was skeptical of why she was bringing that up. "I was there until the age of twenty," he said. "After that, I travelled all over the place as a regional official."

"Is that so?" Kajo said before falling silent.

She seemed to be biting her tongue. Shiki recalled something that Koshun had told him before—she'd lost somebody she knew in Reki Province.

Had that person been killed in the uprising? Even though that came to mind, there was no way Shiki could ask her that himself. He stayed quiet instead. The True Teachings of the Moon, which had spread throughout Reki Province, was eventually destroyed by an uprising staged by its followers. A few years later, the Eight True Teachings had spread as a new religion, with Ga Province as its center. This religion also collapsed after its founder—Hakurai—was banished from the province...but Shiki suspected that Hakurai would start up yet another organization eventually.

"I'd like to borrow *The Sea Edge Legends*. Do you have an idea where I could find it?" Kajo asked, acting as if her previous question had never been voiced.

Shiki also feigned ignorance. "The short stories compiled during the previous dynasty? It'll be over here."

He guided Kajo over to the back of the stack room. The smell of ink hung in the stillness of the air, and the dangling ornament in Kajo's hair made a small sound as it swayed from side to side. *The tone of the sound her hair decoration makes is just as refreshing as she is*, Shiki thought. He also got the sense that she was sorrowful in some way, although he wasn't certain why.

"Oh..." Kajo exclaimed gently.

"Is something the matter?"

Shiki turned round to find that Kajo had stopped and was staring at the back of the shelf beside her.

“Is something the matter?” he asked once more.

“...I just felt like I saw a scholar there.” Kajo tilted her head to one side. The dangling ornament in her hair tinkled as she did. “It seems like it was my imagination, however.”

“Oh, yes.” Shiki turned his eyes toward the shelf. “Did you see it? Most of our scholars have.”

Kajo stared at Shiki. “What do you mean?”

“The ghost. It appears from time to time.”

Kajo was shocked at how casually Shiki mentioned it.

“It doesn’t really cause any harm,” he then added. “Apparently, it’s looking for its book, although I don’t know if that’s true. I simply heard that from another one of our scholars.”

“Its book...?”

“He seems to be a copyist from the previous dynasty. In that era, neglected ancient writings—including *The Sea Edge Legends*—were re-transcribed under the orders of the emperor. The people who carried out that work were called copyists. It’s said that the ghost—one of those very copyists—stole the brushes and paper he was supplied with. He was subsequently executed. They couldn’t possibly leave works transcribed by a criminal out on display, so they, too, were disposed of. He took that to heart, and so he searches the stack rooms to check if even one of his works remains...or so the rumors say.”

Shiki recalled first seeing that ghost about a month prior. He turned around while working in the stack room to suddenly find it standing there, right in front of the shelves with its back toward him, staring fixedly at the scrolls. He could immediately tell that it was no ordinary person. It was partially because the robe the man was wearing was not the blue-green color of the scholars, but yellow—but it was also because he clearly didn’t seem like the living.

Shiki may have felt that because his little sister continued pulling at his sleeve.

In any case, as he watched on with bated breath, the ghost spun around and began trudging along in a different direction, looking down as it did so. There was a shadow over its face, making it hard to see. Despite the darkness, Shiki would have usually expected to be able to make out someone's features to some extent, but it was as if he couldn't see a thing.

The man's robe was also extremely dirty. There was ink splattered from his chest to his hemline, and more on both of his sleeves. It was immediately obvious that his man's work involved some kind of writing. Drooping his head downward, he continued along lifelessly before fading away and disappearing into thin air.

Shiki had already spotted him three times. He frequented the stack rooms himself, so that likely increased his chances of encountering the specter. Some of the other scholars hadn't even seen him yet.

"Poor ghost," Kajo said sympathetically.

Shiki didn't answer and instead advanced between the shelves. He found the scroll that Kajo was looking for and returned holding it.

Kajo's face was still turned toward the shelf where the ghost had been. "Why don't you discuss it with the Raven Consort?" she muttered.

"Pardon me?"

"Nothing, really... I was simply wondering whether you could ask the Raven Consort for some assistance. This has nothing to do with the inner palace, so I suppose it would be inappropriate for me to take that liberty myself...but we wouldn't want it bothering His Majesty, would we?"

"No..."

"I think I'll have to mention it to her myself." After coming to that conclusion without anyone else's input, Kajo nodded, as if she was now convinced. "It would be in the ghost's best interests to get the Raven Consort to help us too."

"Hmm... I'm not so sure."

Shiki had felt the urge to come up with some sort of counterargument. Seemingly not having expected him to challenge her, Kajo opened her eyes

wide with surprise.

“Well, why not?”

“Shouldn’t we just leave the ghost to its own devices until it’s satisfied? There’s no need to force it over to paradise,” he countered.

“‘Force it over’?! No matter how hard he searches, he’s never going to find anything he wrote, is he?” she asked.

“We can’t say that for absolute certain. We don’t know what went on back then. There may be a small chance that something is still here.”

“I see,” said Kajo, cocking her head to one side in thought. Her hair ornament jingled again, its sound lingering in Shiki’s ears. “*You* don’t want him to let him cross over to paradise, do you?” she then said.

Shiki glanced at his own right sleeve. “...That’s not the case.” If the ghost *could* be sent to paradise, he’d like for that to happen. However... “Some things are beyond our control. Not everybody can make the journey over to paradise without a hitch.”

I see it now, Shiki thought. *I have a guilty conscience*. He felt guilty for being the reason that Shomei was unable to make that journey.

“...I do apologize,” he said. “You see, I find the Raven Consort slightly difficult to deal with.”

“Oh.” Kajo looked very surprised to hear this. “You find *her* difficult? Have you met her?”

“I have. It was to do with a...private matter.”

“I see,” said Kajo, knowingly letting this mention of a “private matter” slide. She inferred that Shiki was telling her not to ask about it, despite not putting it so explicitly—and she was correct. “Is that so? She’s a very kind, sweet girl, though.”

“I know that she is kind. That’s the problem.”

Shiki went quiet. It was because of her kindness that he felt like he was being reproached. She would ask him why he felt such hatred, and why he couldn’t bring himself to let go of it—even if Shomei was kept chained to this world as a

consequence.

Shiki's thoughts didn't get through to Jusetsu. It was impossible for them to understand each other. He knew better than anybody that he was at fault. What Jusetsu had to say was correct. He *should* have set Shomei free.

And yet...

"I understand what it is you're trying to say, but that doesn't have anything to do with this ghost." Kajo said, gently yet definitively. "I shall try to ask her about it. Rest assured—she won't do anything that wasn't strictly necessary."

Kajo took the scroll that Shiki was holding off out of his hand.

"Is this *The Sea Edge Legends*? Greatly appreciated." She passed the scroll to one of the eunuchs who were standing in wait behind her. She then gave Shiki a smile. "Please, take care of yourself. You look like you're struggling."

Kajo turned around, her hair ornament once again letting out a crisp clinking noise as it swayed to one side. Its timbre rang in Shiki's ears and never left.

"Amei, do you know about the ghost in the Koto Institute?" Kajo, who visited the Yamei Palace with the scroll in hand, asked Jusetsu. She affectionally addressed Jusetsu as "amei," a term for one's younger sister.

"At the Koto Institute...? I don't."

"There's a ghost that roams the stack rooms there. I saw it myself a short while ago," Kajo said calmly. She didn't seem frightened by ghosts at all—which was possibly to be expected of the emperor's top-ranking consort.

"There're ghosts not just inside the inner palace, but all over the imperial estate. There's no end to them," Jusetsu commented.

"Well, this has been the imperial estate since the days of the previous dynasty, after all. It's no surprise that there are so many spirits in our midst."

"There's been too much bloodshed around here."

Executions, purges, assassinations, curse killings... It was hard to imagine just how many people had lost their lives within the imperial estate's grounds.

Considering it wasn't uncommon for entire families to be executed at once as a punishment, the amount of resentment that had accumulated there over time must have been tremendous.

"So, what's the story with this ghost in the Koto Institute?" asked Jusetu.

"It's a ghost from the previous dynasty. Are you familiar with Reiko Shiki, a scholar from the Koto Institute?"

Jusetu had moved to drink some of her tea but froze. "Well...yes. He's a new scholar, isn't he? He used to be the observation vice-envoy in Ga Province."

"He was the one who told me that story. He's a...sad man, isn't he?" said Kajo.

Shiki's face came to Jusetu's mind. He looked like he was born to a wealthy merchant family and had the gentle features of a pleasant young man, but his eyes were gloomy and shadowy. Jusetu recalled him reminding her of sunlight in early spring—he seemed like he would be warm but turned out to be startlingly cold.

"...He did have a gloominess to him." He seemed to her as if he was at risk of falling into a dark abyss at any moment. "*He* was the one who told you about the ghost?"

Jusetu assumed he must have spoken to Kajo about it when she went to borrow the scroll, and as it turned out, she was right.

Kajo then told her the story of a lingering ghost that was searching for his own work.

Jusetu brooded over this idea. "You say he's searching for something that he himself had written? If he hasn't found anything so far, there can't be anything there."

And yet he kept on searching. It was a pitiful ghost.

"If the story is true, I couldn't bear to leave the poor thing alone...but it *is* in the Koto Institute," continued Jusetu. "I doubt Koshun would like us meddling there without his permission."

If the ghost had been somewhere inside the inner palace, it would have been a different story. However, it would reflect poorly on the emperor if Jusetu

were to go out and do as she pleased without his permission.

Kajo chuckled, amused. "Look at you, worrying about His Majesty! Let us simply tell him about it next time we get the opportunity."

Jusetsu frowned at that. "Even that fool has to keep up appearances, you know. I can at least give that some consideration."

"Hah... Well, why don't you write him a letter, amei? You can get his permission that way. Once you've received his approval, you can do whatever you like without causing him any trouble."

If I do whatever I like, I'll be a nuisance to him regardless of whether I have permission or not, Jusetsu thought, but she decided to accept Kajo's suggestion, nevertheless.

"I shall write him one."

"Do you usually exchange letters with His Majesty?" Kajo asked.

"Every now and then."

"That's good."

"It'd be a waste not to use the paper he sends me," Jusetsu continued. "That's the only reason I write to him."

"Is that right?" Kajo smiled and nodded. "Please, do keep it up. I'm sure His Majesty is thrilled to receive letters from you."

She sounded like an older sister worrying about her younger brother when she talked about Koshun. The two of them must have always been that way.

"Amei, I'm planning on copying this scroll. Once I'm finished, I'm going to give it to you. It may be too difficult for Ishiha right now, but I'm sure he'll be able to read it one day."

Kajo would often trouble herself over Ishiha like that.

"Thank you," said Jusetsu.

Kajo looked pleased. "I'm grateful to have something so rewarding to do. It's delightful to teach things to children."

She told Jusetsu to let her know if she ever needed any more scrap paper

before leaving to go back home.

Had her words been genuine? Kajo had been living her life in the memory of her deceased lover, but was she planning on continuing doing that forever? Of course, it wasn't Juseitsu's place to weigh up the pros and cons of that.

If she really *did* find it as rewarding as she claimed, perhaps Juseitsu could ask her for a little advice on Ishiha's education. She contemplated this as she headed over to the cabinet where her hemp paper and inkstones were located. After all, she'd need them to write that letter.

In her letter, Juseitsu wrote about the ghost at the Koto Institute. She asked him to investigate if there really was a copyist who was executed and requested permission to go to the Koto Institute to see it. It was a blunt, strictly-business letter, but when Koshun read it in his private room in the inner court, it still managed to bring a faint smile to his face.

It was rare for Juseitsu to go out of her way to ask Koshun for something. It must have been because this ghost was outside of the inner palace, and she'd written him letters about things outside the inner palace before. It was typical of her to show this degree of attentiveness while still pretending not to care about the emperor's opinions.

"Eisei, send a messenger to the Yamei Palace, and another to the Koto Institute."

"Yes, master," said Eisei with a bow.

"Tell Juseitsu to do as she pleases. She'll know what I mean. Also, give Reiko Shiki some research to do. Tell him to inspect the records and confirm if there really was a copyist that matches the ghost rumors."

If that copyist had been executed, it would be mentioned in the official records. Official documents from the previous dynasty were useful, so they were still kept. He would be sure to find a record of that person if he took a look at them.

Eisei left the room to dispatch the messengers. Before he made it back, several domestic servant eunuchs arrived before Koshun, flustered.

“Saname Choyo has requested that you grace him with your presence.”

“...Oh.” Koshun paused for a moment. “Show him to the Koshi Palace,” he then ordered.

What could Choyo possibly want from me?

The Koshi Palace sat on the outskirts of the inner court. It was a secluded retreat where the emperor could rest quietly. It wasn't the sort of palace where he would invite guests, so it was a very simple building. Be that as it may, it had a sturdy gate with clay tile roofing and a roofed mud wall that encircled its periphery. Smooth cobblestones formed a path up to its only palace building. The decorative roof tiles on the edges of the roof depicted an old man riding a large turtle, whereas the lanterns hanging from the eaves had wave-patterned fretwork. The small palace building had no garden, but instead, the ground surrounding it was blanketed in white sand—perhaps to imitate a seaside setting.

Koshun passed through the gate in his litter and was lowered down in front of the steps leading to the palace building. Once he stepped out of his litter and made his way up the staircase, Choyo—who was already inside—got to his knees.

A refreshing breeze blew through the building, making the copperplate banners lining the room sway and clink. There was an inlay depicting stars on the room's floor. The design clearly had to do with magic or divination, but Koshun didn't know what it meant.

Koshun sat down on a divan and looked at Choyo, who was on his knees. “I often use this place for confidential discussions.”

Choyo's mouth twitched at that.

“There's no need for preamble,” stated Koshun. “What is it that you need?”

“...Yes.” Choyo lowered his head and began to speak, his eyes still cast downward. “In that case, I shall get straight to the point. Why, Your Majesty, are you allowing the Raven Consort to live?”

His question was so unexpected that Koshun was slightly slow to respond.

“...It’s not your place to ask.”

His voice was deep and cold as it fell to the ground. Its gravity was even a surprise to Koshun himself.

“I am well aware that I have overstepped the mark,” admitted Choyo.

“However, as I previously informed you, I intend to serve you, Your Majesty. Therefore, I am required to admonish you, even if it may mean incurring your displeasure. As an orphan of the previous dynasty...she is nothing but the seed of disaster.”

Koshun gulped at that, though he had expected this to come forward when Choyo asked why he was letting her live.

How had word gotten out? It was conceivable to imagine he had spies around, but where were they? The Hakkaku Palace?

“This is not an issue that you should meddle in. Use more discretion.”

Koshun’s icy tone made Choyo fall silent for a moment, but the man then began to speak once more.

Choyo’s restrained, low voice resonated throughout the room. “...Could you be so kind as to allow me to continue, Your Majesty?”

“...What is it?”

“I do not know what kind of being this ‘Raven Consort’ is. The idea of a consort being skilled in magic is extremely suspicious, but since she is located inside the inner palace, I assume some ancient tradition must be at play, and I don’t have the right to speak on that. Even so, I believe the Raven Consort in her present state presents an excessive danger.”

Choyo’s gaze was sharp—not like the thin edge of a blade, but much more like the intimidating air of a long-handled spear.

“Not only is she descended from the previous dynasty, but I also hear that she has accumulated numerous followers, likely thanks to the skills she possesses. Does that not pose a tremendous threat?” asked Choyo. “I cannot imagine that you are oblivious to this danger, Your Majesty. The best plan must be to put her

into confinement or eliminate her—before it is too late.”

Koshun said nothing to that. Was it true that Choyo didn’t know what the Raven Consort was? *I suppose he hasn’t grasped that much, after all*, he thought. The Raven Consort was the Winter Sovereign, and without her, the Summer Sovereign—the emperor—would not be the ruler.

Or...perhaps Choyo was feigning ignorance. *What would I do if I were in Choyo’s shoes?* Koshun wondered. He would never reveal how far his intelligence network reached. He would only reveal the information that was effective at this stage in time and stay quiet about the rest.

Either way...

As long as Choyo wasn’t going to disclose any additional knowledge he may have had, Koshun had to speak as if he knew as little as Choyo proclaimed to.

“It may be easy for you to speak of ‘eliminating her,’ but that is not an option—and for good reason too. As a result, you are not in a position to speak on the subject. To put it in your own words, yes, an ‘ancient tradition’ is at play.”

Choyo fell silent and stared fixedly at Koshun’s knees, as if he was thinking something through. “Are you saying that you are letting her live simply because there’s a tradition...?”

“Not exactly.” Koshun would never kill Jusetsu, even if there was no “tradition” involved. There was also the fact that he was trying to overturn the very tradition in question. “Still, it isn’t something you need to be aware of.”

It was impossible to discern what Choyo was thinking from his expression. He now looked up at Koshun. “Are you suggesting that this ‘tradition’ poses more of a threat than the chaos that the orphan of the previous dynasty could bring about?”

Koshun paused before responding. “...Correct.”

In truth, he never actually weighed the risks up before. The fact that she was a survivor of the previous dynasty didn’t even compare to the threat of losing the Winter Sovereign. Even so, that was—in a sense—an excuse. A shield to protect Jusetsu’s life.

Koshun was also trying to destroy that shield, attempting to shatter it in order to save Jusetsu from her role as the Raven Consort. The path to saving Jusetsu and the path that threatened Jusetsu's life itself were interconnected.

Koshun felt a lump forming in his throat.

"Understood," said Choyo, giving the emperor a deep bow. "Please forgive my impudence. I sincerely apologize."

"That's all right..."

This man...

Koshun got Choyo to leave, and he then leaned back on his divan. He stared up at the copper banners hanging inside the room. A breeze blew through the area, and crisp, high-pitched sounds rung out.

Choyo had hit Koshun in a spot that he likely knew about from the offset, yet he had unconsciously diverted his attention from. Koshun had turned his eyes away from the risk that Jusetsu's very existence carried.

No—he was well aware of it.

Koshun had extended a helping hand to her *despite* knowing what a risk she posed. He tried to become her friend. He couldn't resist reaching out to her—even though he knew it could be a mistake.

Banka visited Samon Palace, the detached palace where the members of the Saname clan were staying, and was waiting for her father. Although it was still located inside the imperial estate, this was the first time she left the inner palace since becoming a consort.

There was a pond to the southwest of the palace building with a stone terrace jutting out above it. On the terrace sat red sandalwood chairs and a table, with some tea waiting on top of it. Banka's had already gone cold, and her cup hadn't even touched her lips. She'd dismissed her ladies-in-waiting and servants so there was nobody to come and give her a fresh cup. From where she was sitting, she could neither see the blue sky reflecting on the surface of the pond, nor the pine branches in the garden.

After letting out a soft sigh, Banka heard the sound of footsteps making their way down the outer passage, accompanied by the rustling of a robe. The person was moving at a decent pace, but they didn't seem to be rushing. The rustle of their clothing as they moved was being kept to a minimum.

Banka stood up as her father, Choyo, emerged from the outer passage.

Choyo cast a glance toward her. "You really should have waited inside," he said simply, in a curt tone of voice. There wasn't much affection in his words, even though this was the first time he had seen his youngest daughter in several years.

"It's been a long time, Father," Banka said.

"Why won't you obey my orders?"

Choyo hated wasting his energy. As a result, the closer somebody was to him, the more he avoided wasting his breath on unnecessary words—whether it be greetings that most would consider a matter of course, or general conversation. He didn't see the value of them. He didn't even bother asking Banka how she'd been.

I know what he means, but...

Banka gently bit her bottom lip. "What orders?" she asked.

Choyo scowled.

"Leave out the petty attempts at evading the issue. It's a waste of my time," he said. "I thought I told you to stay away from the Raven Consort."

"...I have."

"Were you 'staying away' from her when you snuck out of the Hakkaku Palace to pay her a visit?"

Banka couldn't answer that. Her movements had been leaked. One of her ladies-in-waiting must have told on her.

"Why did you tell me to keep away?" she asked instead.

"Because she is a survivor of the previous dynasty."

Choyo's unhesitating statement left Banka blindsided. A survivor from the

previous dynasty? Jusetsu? She thought all of their relatives had been captured and beheaded.

“Some time ago, His Majesty revoked the decree that called for the capture and killing of the previous imperial family, proclaiming that it was no longer needed,” he continued. “That must have been for the Raven Consort’s sake. His Majesty is attaching too much importance to her.”

There was a tinge of apprehension on Choyo’s face.

“Such an action is unbeseeming of His Majesty, considering he is usually so honest and honorable. This will give rise to disaster, no matter how you look at it. If we leave him to his own devices, things shall collapse from the inside. If he were to go as far as staging a rebellion for that Raven Consort’s benefit, punishment will extend to those closest to him. That’s why I’m telling you to stay away from her.”

“I can’t believe that she’s a survivor from the previous dynasty...” Banka said.

“You were the one who told me about it in your letter. You said that you weren’t certain whether she had silver hair or if it was just gray, but she was dyeing her hair. And so, I made use of my connections and had them look into it further. It’s not so hard to check if you get them to focus on her hair from the beginning. One fallen strand is all you need. The Raven Consort’s hair is silver. This is proof that she is descended from the previous dynasty,” Choyo explained.

Banka turned pale. For her, someone who spent her life in Ga Province—a considerable distance from the imperial capital—and never even leaving her home properly, stories about the previous dynasty were more like tales from a faraway, foreign land. She also had no idea that silver hair was proof that someone was related to them.

If she *had* known, would she have been able to bring herself to tell her father about Jusetsu’s hair?

Banka stared at her tea, which had long gone cold. She didn’t have an answer.

“Let me say it again. Stay away from the Raven Consort. This is not only for your own benefit, but for the sake of the Saname clan as a whole.”

Choyo left it there and exited the terrace. Banka's eyes remained fixed on her cup the entire time as she listened to him walk away.

"What's your problem? Did our father summon ya?"

Hearing such an unreserved manner of speaking prompted Banka to look up. Her elder brother, the one closest to her in age, was standing near the outer passage. She could see her eldest brother standing behind him too.

Ryo, that brother just above her in age order, strode straight over to her. Unlike her father, his footsteps and the rustling of his clothes made *plenty* of noise. Her eldest brother, Shin, walked in a comparatively leisurely and calm manner as he made his way closer as well. His gait made him look like he was sliding along, which was reflective of his cautious personality.

"It's been a while," Ryo said. "I wish our father had told us you were here. Where is he?"

"...He went back inside," she said.

"Huh? Didn't he stay around to keep you company? Now all that tea has gone to waste." Ryo had this side to him.

Banka glared at her brother. "He's busy."

"Our father always devotes a decent amount of time to his guests, regardless of whether he's busy. He just thinks you're not worth it."

At that, Banka held her tea out toward Ryo and poured it over him.

"It's *freezing*!" he yelled. "You idiot. You're always so..."

"Stop it, both of you. You're not children anymore. It's shameful," Shin said disdainfully. He turned to Ryo. "Don't get carried away just because it's been a long time since you saw each other." Banka's turn was next. "And is that the way a consort should be acting?"

He's more arrogant than he used to be just a few years ago, Banka thought. As Choyo didn't speak to his children very much himself, Banka's eldest brother always took it upon himself to discipline his younger brothers and sister. To some extent, he was a wise and insightful man. Even so, the way he spoke down to them triggered them to retaliate.

Ryo looked the other way. Banka being Banka, she gave her brother a sulky look instead.

Shin stared at her face and narrowed his eyes questioningly. “You’re looking a little pale. Are you sure you’re feeling all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine,” she said.

“No, you don’t look it. Have a lie down for a while,” Ryo chimed in.

“I have to go home now,” said Banka, getting to her feet.

“Already?” asked Ryo, surprised.

“I’m not supposed to leave the inner palace for too long.” Her litter was still waiting for her. Since her business with her father was complete, she had no reason to stay longer than necessary.

“Come again sometime. We’re gonna be here for a while still.”

“I shall come if our father calls me.”

“For goodness’ sake...” Ryo muttered, but Banka ignored him and left the terrace.

...What can I do?

Banka considered whether she should tell her father that the Raven Consort wasn’t as dangerous as he thought.

...But even if I did, there’s no way he would ever listen to what I had to say...

As Koshun had committed to allowing her to “do as she pleased,” Jusetsu made her way over to the Koto Institute. Going in her Raven Consort garb would startle the scholars there, so she was dressed as a eunuch. Onkei and Tankai were accompanying her, so from an outsider’s perspective, it’d just look like a gang of three eunuchs had arrived.

Shiki was waiting in front of the palace building and looked fairly surprised to see Jusetsu in her eunuch disguise. Jusetsu glanced at his right sleeve—there was a pale hand clutching onto it, as always.

“There’s a constant need for natural history records from foreign countries

and texts related to governmental affairs like laws, imperial rescripts, and calendars to be copied, so transcription work is still being carried out here in the Koto Institute in the present day. Would you like to have a look?" Shiki asked.

"Mm-hmm," replied Jusetu with a nod. Jusetu didn't actually know how it was done.

"This way."

Shiki opened the door to one of the rooms. Not especially spacious inside, shelves filled with scrolls covered its walls. In the center of the room were rows of long tables where young men in ink-stained robes intently copied things down, brushes in hand. They didn't look up once, not even when Jusetu and the others came inside. It must have been because they'd mess up their work if they made any rash movements.

"There are three different jobs involved in transcription work: binding, copying, and proofreading. All of these tasks are done by apprentice scholars. In the past, it seemed as though skilled writers were brought in from public offices and given temporary employment to do this. Anyway, in this room, our copyists are doing transcription work. To explain the work process to you, it begins with the binders preparing the paper that will be used for transcribing. Depending on the format of the text that is to be copied, this will be in the form of a scroll or a lined, bound book—but scrolls are still used most frequently. In order to make a scroll, the paper is spliced together one sheet at a time—with approximately 20 sheets being used per scroll—and is beaten smooth to prevent the brush from getting stuck. Then, lines are drawn to align the characters with. The copyists use this paper to copy the text onto, and the proofreaders check that they haven't made any errors. That's how it works, in simple terms."

The ghost Jusetu had been told about was a copyist, which meant that he was tasked with copying out the texts.

"Payment is on a piece-rate basis, so if their work is discarded due to a writing error, it's deducted from their earnings. As a result, everyone is on edge while they're transcribing."

In that case, we shouldn't disturb them, thought Jusetu. She swiftly left the

room. They weren't "simply" copying letters. The act of "simply" copying them, and doing it correctly, was an extremely nerve-racking task.

"This job is no laughing matter," Jusetu remarked.

"It's not," Shiki replied. It sounded like he was satisfied that Jusetu had grasped that. She figured he anticipated that Jusetu wouldn't be familiar with what transcription work was actually like when she came face-to-face with the ghost, so that's why he started by showing her how it worked. Shiki was a man with a good understanding of the order in which things should be done.

"And here is the stack room where the ghost tends to appear."

Shiki opened the door to another room. The air stunk, although Jusetu couldn't tell whether it was the smell of mold or of ink.

"We've looked into whether there actually *was* a copyist who was executed by order of the emperor..."

"And was there?" asked Jusetu as she looked around the stack room.

"There was," Shiki replied plainly. "It was during the reign of the fifth emperor of the previous dynasty, the same emperor who ordered the transcription and compilation of historical texts. The copyist in question was named Keichu, and he was executed for the crime of stealing cork tree paper used for transcription."

"The death penalty for stealing paper...?"

"Cork tree paper is a kind of paper that's been dyed using the yellow color extracted from cork trees. Since it protects against insect damage, it's sold at extremely high prices. What's more is that since the job of transcribing those historical texts was under an imperial order, stealing the materials used for it was equivalent to stealing the emperor's own possessions. As a result, he was sentenced to death. The paper that copyists were provided with was strictly monitored in a register called the paper supply register, so it would immediately be noticed if some was stolen."

"Oh..." said Jusetu to show she was listening as she slowly walked through the shelves.

Suddenly, the figure of a person appeared in the corner of her eye. She looked in the figure's direction to find a young man in a yellow robe with his back to her, standing right in front of one of the shelves. He seemed to be staring hard at the scrolls there, looking at the ones at the far side in turn.

Jusetsu walked up to him. "...Have you found something you wrote?"

The young man froze and sluggishly looked around. He had a sickly, bluish-white face with dark circles under his eyes. He appeared to be in his mid-twenties. The cuffs of his sleeves were dirty and the area covering his chest and below were soiled with ink. Ishiha would get himself in somewhat of a mess when he practiced writing, but it was nowhere near as terrible as this. The apprentice scholars Jusetsu had seen just a moment ago had ink on their robes too, but just how fervently had this man been writing to end up like this?

The man's eyes wandered around the room, as if he was trying to locate the source of the voice.

"Keichu," said Jusetsu, calling his name.

Startled, the young man's eyes finally focused on Jusetsu's face.

"Have you found something you wrote?" Jusetsu repeated her question.

Keichu gently shook his head from side to side, still wearing a vacant look. "I never will," he said hoarsely. He hung his head and let out a deep sigh.

He seems to be the sort of ghost you can converse with, Jusetsu observed—and so she decided to continue questioning him.

"Then why are you still searching?"

"It was just so abhorrent—burning every single scroll I ever copied..."

It was as if he and Jusetsu weren't quite on the same page in this conversation. She waited for him to continue.

"What have I done wrong?" he lamented. "Day in, day out, all I ever did was transcribe—straining my eyes to read those partially rotten bamboo strips, or ones with half-faded ink. I was constantly drenched in sweat, without even a spare moment to wash my robe... Well, there was all that about me stealing the cork tree paper, but I was far from stealing it, however. I made so few mistakes

that I never even wasted a single sheet. And yet... And yet..."

He didn't steal it?

Jusetsu and Shiki exchanged looks. The ghost was claiming that he was falsely accused. Shiki frowned, then gave a small nod in Jusetsu's direction. Jusetsu took this as meaning, *"I'll look into it."*

"So you were executed for something you have no recollection of doing?" she asked the spirit.

"It's dreadful. I devoted so much of myself to my work, day after day, only for that to happen..." Keichu grimaced in frustration. He seemed to be more upset that the texts he copied had been disposed of rather than that he'd been executed.

"I collected heaps of scrolls that were scattered throughout the imperial estate in the vaults of its historical archives and buried in dust. I carefully cleaned them and copied them... Those scrolls were filled with invaluable ancient legends that are now lost. It was such an honor to be involved in the wonderful and meaningful work of preserving them for future generations... And yet here we are... It's *dreadful!*"

Keichu covered his face with his hands and began to cry bitterly. Even his fingers and fingernails were stained an inky black. He must have been truly dedicated to his work.

And yet he'd been executed for a crime he didn't commit, and all of his transcription work had been burned...

It didn't make sense. What could have happened?

"How did things end up like this?" Jusetsu asked. "Do you have any ideas?"

"It's dreadful. All I did was transcribe, day after day. And they accused me of taking the paper for myself..."

Jusetsu and Keichu definitely were having slightly different conversations, but it didn't sound like he knew how such a situation had unfolded either.

"Some of what I transcribed must still be here. This is where I'll find it. I can smell my ink. It must be here... It *has* to be..." Keichu starting walking, swaying

side to side as he did so, and went to stand right next to one of the shelves.

“Oh... No, that’s not it... It’s not that one, either...” he murmured as he stared intently at the scrolls.

He then made his way between the shelves, groaning. As he did this, he began to fade away. Just as he went behind one of the shelves, he disappeared completely.

He must have been wandering among the shelves for all these years.

Jusetsu looked around the room. There were countless shelves stacked tightly with scrolls, from those made of bamboo to those made of paper. There was a long table at the back with a folding screen partitioning it off. The stack room wasn’t as large as a reception hall, but it still contained an outstanding number of works.

“...Keichu insisted that some of his transcription work *had* to be here.”

“I’m not convinced of that. If his instincts were correct, he probably would have found it already,” Shiki replied.

“But Keichu himself *is* certain,” Jusetsu argued. “Are the texts which were copied out as part of the transcription effort he was involved in stored in this stack room?”

“The transcription work carried out under that emperor’s orders? Indeed it is. The Mandarin Duck Consort came and borrowed one of the pieces in question just the other day.”

“Oh, that one was?”

“There are many more texts that were transcribed as part of the same effort. There’s a whole shelf’s worth,” he explained.

“That many?”

“The historical texts that these transcriptions were based off would have been even longer, so I believe copying them out and compiling them would have been a challenging task. After all, those were the texts that the first emperor amassed from all over the country.”

“From all over?”

“Yes. He asked people give texts they had at home to the estate as a gift to the emperor. Those who did so were given prized silk as a reward. Topographies and unusual folklore records received more plentiful rewards. Time went by, and before long, the pieces were buried in the corner of the stack rooms, gathering dust. Then, one day, the fifth emperor rediscovered the value of those records and attempted to preserve them for future generations.”

Shiki guided Jusetu to the front of a shelf crammed full of paper scrolls. Shiki picked up the closest one and passed it to Jusetu. Its binding and the stick in the center that the scroll was rolled around didn't look to be especially expensive, but she could tell they were properly, carefully made. It seemed that substance had been prioritized over splendor.

Jusetu stared at the shelf. “If it's all here, Keichu would have been able to find his work.”

“Well, you would assume so, but...”

His work wasn't there—not a single thing that he'd copied out. In that case, perhaps there was nothing left after all—despite Keichu insisting that there had to be.

“...Let's take Keichu's word for it. I shall work on the basis that his transcription work *is* here and search for it,” Jusetu stated.

“But how...?” Shiki was confused. There was no way she could look for his work—she wouldn't know whether it was his writing.

“If Keichu has looked this hard and still hasn't located anything, then it must be difficult to find. Do you have any ideas?”

“Difficult...?” Shiki repeated. “The only scenario that seems likely would be that paper that he had to scrap was reused.”

“What do you mean?”

“If there's paper that's no longer needed or that has misprints on it, the back is used.”

“I see.” Jusetu received scrap paper like that from other consorts' palaces so Ishiha could use it for his writing practice.

“If that’s the case, that would mean Keichu’s work is still here—just on the backside of another text...but it wouldn’t have been used in the ones stored in this stack room,” Shiki said. “The ones here are reading materials—short stories and the like. Scrap paper is used for texts where it doesn’t matter if the writing on the back shows through, like registries. Those, however, are stored in stack rooms in the public office rather than here in the Koto Institute. The oldest and most comprehensive collection is in the imperial library’s historical archives, so you may be able to find remainders of his work there...but either way, you won’t have any luck *here*.”

“Technically, no—but there might still be a chance.”

“Are you intending to check every single scroll?” Shiki looked back at the shelves—at the piled-up scrolls, in their tremendous numbers.

“Half of these are bamboo and wooden scrolls. I can also exclude those that were created after Keichu’s time. How about that?” Jusetu reasoned.

“Hmph,” Shiki grunted. “If you were to do that...it’d narrow your options down by about two-thirds.”

“We shall search the remaining third for any that have text written on the back,” Jusetu said, before calling the names of the eunuchs who were to assist her with this task. “Onkei. Tankai.”

“Understood,” Onkei responded, but Tankai wasn’t as cooperative.

“Huh? *We’re* the ones doing it?” he said.

Shiki raised his hand to stop them. “Scrolls need to be handled with care, so I shall take on that job. I shall let you know if I find anything.”

The scrolls couldn’t get torn or dirty—so Jusetu decided to leave it to Shiki.

“Raven Consort.”

As Jusetu was about to leave the stack room, Shiki called out her name to stop her. Jusetu stopped, but Shiki faltered over his words, as if he were unsure what to say. A hand was brushing against his right arm.

“...Are you angry with me, esteemed Raven Consort?”

“Angry? Why would I be?”

“For not being able to set Shomei free...and not sending her over to paradise.” Shiki looked down. There was a tinge of distress on his face. “I’m sure you blame me for that, even if you do not say as much. Shomei could be at peace, if only I could bring myself to give in...”

Jusetsu frowned. “If you’re feeling guilty, you may as well hurry up and send her on her way. Do not shift the blame for your guilt onto me,” she snapped, and with that, she left the stack room. She had a rough feeling inside her chest.

“That was unusually harsh,” said Tankai, but Jusetsu didn’t respond.

She felt like she’d put things harshly too. Whenever she looked at Shiki, he left her with an unpleasant taste in her mouth, like bitter medicine that refused to melt sitting on her tongue. She wanted to suggest that he consult Koshun for advice, but the words had gotten caught in her throat. Why would she mention Koshun at a time like this?

Jusetsu hurried away from the Koto Institute, furrowing her brow indignantly.

“There’s certainly something questionable about the theft that the copyist Keichu was charged with.”

Shiki was in one of the rooms in the Koto Institute, updating Koshun on their findings. It was a room that people rarely visited. The only thing in this room was a red lacquer cabinet. Inside of it were ancient chronologies and divination books that only a select few were permitted to view—the most important texts of all.

“He was arrested on the basis that he stole some cork tree paper and was executed the very same day. It’s not clear whether he admitted to the crime. We haven’t been able to find out what he did with the paper he allegedly stole, and there’s no indication that the case was even put to trial at the Autumn Ministry. It will come as no surprise to hear that the paper registry from that time is no longer around, so we won’t be able to investigate how many pieces of paper were said to be stolen, but...there *are* a few other things that are a cause of concern.”

“What do you mean?”

“The conduct of the then-emperor was logged in the imperial diary...”

The imperial diary was a written record of what the emperor said and did while conducting official business. It was chronicled by the imperial secretariat’s information officer and the chancellery’s diarist.

“There are logs showing that the emperor went to visit the place where the transcription work was being carried out,” Shiki continued. “It sounds like he went to check how the copyists’ work was progressing. Keichu was captured and executed the following day.”

“Oh...”

“Further still, the emperor was furious upon hearing about Keichu’s crime and ordered him to be beheaded immediately, as well as demanding that all of his transcription work should be burned. It was the emperor who had Keichu executed, and his writing disposed of.”

Koshun stroked his chin with his fingers. The emperor had had Keichu killed. But why...?

Was there a reason why he had to kill him? Still, framing the man for a crime that he didn’t commit so he could be executed was a very roundabout way of doing it. Koshun thought the quickest way to kill him would have been to do it with a sword, on the grounds that Keichu angered him.

No—he’d have to be a true tyrant to do that.

In practice, this was easier said than done. If Koshun, hypothetically speaking, were to cut down anyone who upset him without consulting others, there would be an uproar. There were no records proclaiming that the fifth emperor of the Ran dynasty was a tyrant.

If an emperor who’d never usually kill his subjects out of anger were to commit such an act, it would inevitably attract attention, and this emperor didn’t *want* to attract attention to himself. He wanted to simply execute a man for a crime and be done with it.

“He ordered all of his transcription work to be burned...”

Was that what this all this situation came down to?

“Did you find anything that Keichu had transcribed? You said that you were going to look if there was any paper that had writing on the other side.”

Shiki shook his head. “There was no such paper. I even went as far as looking into texts from before Keichu’s time, but the search was fruitless.”

“Still, that paper has to be somewhere, doesn’t it?” Koshun asked.

“That’s just what the ghost himself claims...and the Raven Consort believes him.”

“I see. In that case, I’m sure he’s right.”

Shiki blinked in astonishment. “But...”

“Perhaps Jusetsu wouldn’t be able to use her item-locating abilities on this one occasion. This man is from the previous dynasty, after all—I’m not sure whether it would work.”

Still, this *was* Jusetsu he was talking about. Koshun was sure she could find a way.

Shiki stared at the emperor with a somewhat baffled look on his face. Koshun was smiling.

When Shiki notified her that there were no texts with writing on the other side of the paper, Jusetsu felt disappointed. What was she supposed to do now?

Well, at times like that, it was a good idea to ask somebody else for advice.

“I’m going to the Winter Ministry.”

She turned down Jiujiu—who was enthusiastically trying to get her dressed up to the nines—and was planning on going dressed in her eunuch outfit as she usually did.

That was when Tankai chimed in. “You’ll have less trouble if you go dressed as a consort.”

“But my eunuch outfit makes it easier for me to move.”

“Unlike the Koto Institute, the Winter Ministry is some distance away,” he

pointed out. "It'll be a pain if an official picks a fight with you on your way."

"Would they do that?"

"Some of those guys like to pick fights with eunuchs. I doubt anyone would be reckless enough to mess with a *consort*, however."

"...All right then."

It was second nature to see eunuchs out and about in the inner palace, but that wasn't the case once you went out into outer court. *I suppose he must have had a bad experience when visiting the outer court as a bodyguard in the past*, Jusetsu thought to herself. Perhaps it was best that she didn't take him there with her.

"Don't worry about it, niangniang," Onkei calmly cut in, as if sensing Jusetsu's anxiety. "Tankai, think before you speak."

"Don't you think she needs to know how to avoid danger before it happens?"

"Even if an official were to pick a fight with her, such an individual would be no real opponent."

"Still, you don't wanna be dealing with the aftermath of bashing one of those guys up," Tankai said.

"It's easy to get the kinds of people who'd pick on you because you look weak to give in—you just have to threaten them a little."

"Oh..." Jusetsu said. It didn't sound like Onkei was joking to her...or was he?

"All right, niangniang, let's get you dressed up."

Jiujiu gleefully dashed behind the curtain as Jusetsu decided to follow Tankai's advice for the time being. Jiujiu chose a grape-colored shanqun with birds and flowers embroidered onto it. She paired it with a dark green skirt featuring a printed twin fish pattern. Jusetsu picked out the purple belt herself.

"You need to look like a proper consort," Jiujiu said as she stuffed Jusetsu's hair full of hairpins and dangling ornaments. Just as she was about to slide a comb with jade on it into her hair, Jusetsu stopped her.

"That's enough," she said. The amount of weight on her head was getting to

be far too much.

“All right then, I shall be back,” Jusetu announced, and then she left the palace building. Recently, it had become second nature for Jusetu to say goodbye to her attendants like that.

Jiujiu saw Jusetu and the others off from in front of the doorway.

Kogyo, meanwhile, was checking over Ishiha’s writing practice. At times like this, the two of them looked like mother and son.

“You should take on more eunuchs and court ladies, niangniang. Then, you could have a whole line of people following you wherever you go,” Tankai suggested as he walked behind Jusetu.

“There’s simply not enough room for that many people to live at the Yamei Palace.”

“Even so, I think there are tons of people who’d jump at the chance to work for you.”

“Surely not.” Jusetu laughed.

“I’m not kidding,” said Tankai. “More people are visiting the Yamei Palace nowadays, and you seem to be getting more presents as well.”

Tankai was saying this with a surprisingly serious look on his face. Now that he mentioned it, she realized that people really had started turning up with gifts such as fruit and silk lately, despite not having any requests to make. Jusetu had turned the presents away though, insisting that she didn’t want them.

This was becoming a bit of a problem. Was she taking on too many requests? No, she’d be ashamed to turn people away bluntly after they came begging her for help.

Jusetu contemplated what to do about this as she made her way to her destination.

The Winter Ministry, which was positioned on the outskirts of the imperial estate, was as quiet and deserted as ever. The cobblestones on the ground were broken and chipped in places, and the copper lanterns had green rust on them. However, the banner on Seiu Shrine had recently been replaced, along

with the lanterns hanging from the eaves. Fragrant smoke was rising from a large incense burner. It looked as if some funds had been procured to repair the shrine. Every corner of the area had been swept clean, and the interior looked fresh and clean in the fall sun without a speck of dust in sight.

“Who would have thought that the financial affairs department—who are allegedly too stingy to pay for a single piece of paper—would shell out for the shrine’s repairs?” Jusetu joked to the Winter Minister, To Senri, who came out to welcome her.

Her tongue-in-cheek comment brought a smile to Senri’s thin face.

“The money didn’t come from the financial affairs department,” he explained. “It was a personal contribution from His Majesty. We’re planning on gradually repairing the place, bit by bit.”

I should have known, thought Jusetu. Going through officials made everything slower and more complicated. Providing the money himself would be less hassle—and quicker too. Koshun was always conscious of this sort of thing. As silly as he might have been with women, he was still a diligent individual.

“Please, come this way.”

Senri invited Jusetu and the others into the palace building. His dark, bluish-gray robe suited his tall, slender frame perfectly. Feathers from the tail of a northern pintail—a bird otherwise known as hakuen or “white smoke”—swayed from side to side in the futou he wore. Despite being prone to illness, the man’s complexion had been looking much healthier lately. Jusetu wondered if that was thanks to the emperor’s contributions too, but she then realized the departure of the hot weather was a more likely cause. He seemed to be in good form physically as well. He was so thin that his eyes typically looked piercing, but even those looked somewhat gentler now.

“You seem well,” Jusetu commented.

“I am. This time of the year is the best for me,” he replied in a mellow voice. He may have looked like a shrewd and hard-to-please official, but in reality, Senri was a gentle and friendly person—the opposite of what his appearance would suggest.

Jusetsu was led to a room with a Go board laid out on a small table by the window.

“Care for a game?” Senri asked, noticing that Jusetsu was looking at it.

“No, I don’t think...” Jusetsu began, but she then had second thoughts about declining his invitation. “...Well, I played against Koshun the other day. I would like to hear what moves you would have made if you’d been in my place. He tells me that every single move I come up with is a bad one.”

Jusetsu then began to reenact her recent Go match with Koshun from the very beginning on Senri’s Go board.

“And then, if I were to move here...”

“Wouldn’t this place be better?” Senri suggested.

“...And then what? If could move here...”

“No, surely you’d be better off moving to *this* spot.”

“...” Jusetsu huffily put down her stone. “You make the same suggestions as Koshun does.”

“Ha ha, I doubt I could come up with any moves better than His Majesty,” replied Senri with a laugh. “If these are in line with the suggestions that His Majesty made, then they must be the best moves possible.”

“But I wanted to come up with some moves that he never could,” countered Jusetsu.

“And you’re asking me for help with that?”

“There’s nothing wrong with a *tiny* bit of foul play, is there?”

Senri chuckled cheerfully. “Understood. I shall keep this a secret from His Majesty.”

Jusetsu felt very childish when faced with Senri. This was only natural, considering Senri was over forty, but it made her wonder if it was partly because he was making her feel like that way. He didn’t speak to her in a particularly formal manner. He may have respectfully addressed her as the Raven Consort, but she got the impression that he was treating her like any

other young girl, rather than someone so revered.

Senri offered her some tea that had been brought over for them. “Is there anything else you wanted to ask me about today?”

“There is.” Jusetu nodded before taking a sip. The tea served here was a nourishing kind, specially brewed for the sake of Senri’s health. Today, the tea was fragrant and had a sweetness to it. When Jusetu asked him what was in it, he said that it was a combination of roasted barley, pine nuts, and jujube.

As she took in the tea’s unusual flavor, Jusetu told him about the ghost in the stack room.

“He insists that some of his transcription work *has* to be there, does he?” Senri said, before taking a sip of his tea. “Hmm...” He stroked his narrow chin thoughtfully.

“I had a scholar from the Koto Institute search for me, but none of the texts had anything written on the other side. Where else do you think I should look? I don’t have any other ideas. Not only are you well-read, but I also thought you might know something.”

“Don’t think too highly of me,” Senri said, forcing a smile. “Still, I may have a few ideas. I believe that focusing on the point about the writing being on the back shows keen insight. The ghost must be unable to find his work because it doesn’t exist as an ordinary piece of writing.”

“Are there any other forms it could have taken?” Jusetu asked.

“There’s more than one way to reuse scrap paper—writing on the back of it is just one of many. *Scholars* may not use paper for anything other than writing... but it can be used in other ways, such as wrapping it around broken objects when putting them away in a box, or as cushioning material. Otherwise, it could be used as packaging for medicinal ingredients, or to wrap pigments used for painting.”

“I see,” said Jusetu. “But there’s nothing but reading material in that stack room.”

“Is that right? In which case...” Senri thought to himself for a moment, then looked up again. “When you make a folding screen, for example, paper is

pasted to it, beneath the pictures, to act as a reinforcement. Scrap paper is used for that.”

“Oh? I didn’t know that it was used for such a thing.” Jusetu placed a finger on the tip of her chin as she tried to remember what the stack room was like. “...I knew I wouldn’t regret asking you for help,” Jusetu said with a smile.

“Was I of any help?”

“Very much so.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” said Senri, smiling.

For some reason or another, talking to Senri calmed Jusetu down. He was someone she could be herself around.

“You don’t seem particularly interested in this,” Senri began after they both took a break from drinking their tea, “but there’s one part of your story that’s weighing on my mind.”

“What is it?” Jusetu asked.

“The reason for the copyist, Keichu’s, execution.”

“Oh... That certainly is a cause for concern.”

Since Jusetu was more fixated on the whereabouts of Keichu’s transcription work than why he was falsely accused, Jusetu hadn’t dared to try to look into that issue. Her interests lay solely with sending the ghost over to paradise.

“There must have been a reason why he wanted to get rid of him in such a hurry...”

Senri glanced over at the lattice window, absorbed in thought. Jusetu quietly sipped her tea.

“Now that you mention it,” said Senri, turning his face back toward Jusetu. “Have you gotten the chance to see Ho Ichigyo?”

“No, not yet. Although I do hear he’s on the mend.”

With the case of the golden cup and everything else that was going on, Jusetu had been kept very busy. She hadn’t had an opportunity to meet with him so far.

“In that case, could I ask to join you when you do get to meet him?”

“Of course, I wouldn’t mind. But...” Jusetsu trailed off.

“I heard quite a lot about the previous dynasty from my predecessor, Gyoei, but there’s still so much I have yet to find out. It really was a significant loss when the shamans were driven out of the imperial estate. Since they were allowed access to the inner palace, Ho Ichigyo must know a lot that even the Winter Minister was oblivious to.”

“I thought that too,” Jusetsu said.

“I’m also proceeding with my own research, so I’d appreciate your patience with that.” Senri was conducting research about the Raven Consort, primarily based off the notes that Gyoei left behind.

I hope he’s not forcing himself to work despite his illness, Jusetsu thought.

Neither Senri nor Koshun were really required to put in any work for her, and yet, they did.

“Thank you,” she said. “And...remember to take good care of your health.”

“There’s no need for you to worry about me, Raven Consort. I’m not solely doing this for your sake—nor am I obligated to do so as the Winter Minister.”

“Then why are you doing it?”

Senri cracked a smile. “Intellectual curiosity.”

Jusetsu smiled too. “Is that right? I see. That sounds like you.”

When Jusetsu got back to the Yamei Palace after visiting Senri, she wrote a letter to Koshun, asking him for a certain favor. The emperor gave her an answer a few days later, and upon receiving the news, Jusetsu headed over to the Koto Institute.

She entered the stack room to find Koshun standing near the back. Eisei was standing in wait beside him.

“You came.”

“Did you find it?” Jusetsu hurried over to Koshun.

The folding screen at the back of the room was no longer there, and there were papers laid out on the table.

“This was the paper that was pasted underneath the folding screen. I told the craftsman at the court workshop about it and got them to peel it off. They’re skilled workers, but since this paper was being used as an underlay, it inevitably suffered some serious damage. There are some areas that are barely readable.”

“I don’t mind it being hard to read,” she said. “I’m just pleased to find that there was writing there.”

When Senri mentioned that wastepaper was used as underlay for folding screens, it reminded her of the screen she saw in this room.

I do hope this is Keichu’s transcription work, she thought.

There were nearly thirty sheets of paper in total. They were tinged with yellow and had spots of dark brown. Jusetu could see that some of the letters had peeled off the sheets, making the text illegible.

“The folding screen had six panes, and each of them had an underlay of five sheets of paper spliced together vertically. These were then coated with white clay to create a base, and that’s why the damage is so severe. If you look at all the places that are legible, the handwriting seems to be the same. This work was all done by the same person.”

Jusetu took a step away from the table and looked behind her. A ghost had emerged from behind the shelves without her even needing to use her magic.

It was Keichu.

Hanging his head, he shuffled his way over to them before suddenly coming to a halt and looking up. He had dark bags under his eyes and a slightly skeptical look on his sickly, pale face. Then, his eyes opened wide with surprise. It nearly looked as if his eyeballs were going to pop out of his head.

“Oh... Ohh...” Keichu groaned.

He staggered over to the table. He peered down at the paper laid out on the table and stared at letter after letter from up close. Gradually, his eyes began welling up with tears.

“Oh... There’s no question about it... That’s my writing...” he said in a hoarse whisper loud enough for Koshun and Jusetsu to hear. “This was where it was...”

One teardrop—followed by another—fell from his eyes, but instead of getting the paper wet, they disappeared into thin air. It almost looked as if his tears were being swallowed up by the letters themselves. With every tear that fell, the vision of Keichu became fainter. He traced the inked letters with his finger.

He let out a sigh of wonder, and—as if on cue—the ghost dissolved into nothingness.

“...He seemed satisfied with that,” said Jusetsu, walking up to the table. She picked up one of the sheets of paper and examined it. The letters were all the same size and written with the same thickness. You could even make out thin, tiny little lines in between each brushstroke, a testament as to how careful he had been with his brush. One could call it overly meticulous, but it didn’t change the fact that his writing was startlingly precise. It showed just how careful and reliable Keichu had been in his work.

“He had lovely writing,” Jusetsu said, innocently praising Keichu’s lettering—but it was also her way of expressing her sympathy for the man.

“And yet, this transcription work was the reason he was killed...” said Koshun, slowly gathering each sheet of paper on the table together.

“What do you mean?” Jusetsu asked.

“The day before Keichu’s capture and execution, the emperor visited the place where the transcription was being conducted. It was probably then that he realized... Keichu was copying something that he shouldn’t have been.”

“Something he shouldn’t have been...?” Jusetsu repeated.

Koshun nodded. “Keichu may have had a crime pinned on him and was executed for it, but killing him was not the objective. The goal was to dispose of what he copied down.”

After all, the emperor *had* ordered all of his transcription work to be burned...

“The emperor had people collect the ancient texts that had been sitting dormant in the imperial estate’s stack rooms. He ordered for them to be

transcribed in order to be preserved for posterity. However, I personally feel that it may have actually been the other way around.”

“What do you mean by that?” Jusetsu asked.

“He did that so they could eradicate whatever he *didn’t* want preserved for future generations. *That’s* why he got people to gather them up. Those texts were the ones the first emperor of the dynasty had gotten his subjects to gift to him. He even gave them rewards for doing so. I believe that, too, was done to conceal things inside the imperial estate that the emperor didn’t want the rest of the world to know. Paper was scarce at the time, and there weren’t that many houses with scrolls in their possession. I don’t know if he was intending to dispose of certain texts, or perhaps word about his plan to get rid of them got out, but he ended up storing them in stack rooms anyway. Later, the fifth emperor of the dynasty resolved to dispose of them himself. He thought he successfully cherry-picked the parts he wanted to keep, but something else was mixed in with the texts that were being transcribed...”

And so, it had been copied out in error.

“...In that case, wouldn’t it have been enough for him to simply dispose of the ancient texts that had gotten mixed in, along with the transcription, without executing anybody?”

“That would have drawn even more attention to it,” Koshun reasoned. “People would wonder what those old texts that weren’t supposed to be copied were about. That’s why he used an execution to cover the entire thing. From what I can gather from the imperial diary, the emperor took great care to make the sequence of events seem natural. The original texts in question were probably mixed in with Keichu’s transcription work and burned as well.”

Jusetsu scowled and stared at the paper she was holding. *He was killed because of something like this?* What could this text—which was apparently even more important than somebody’s life—possibly have said?

“Keichu was innocent and executed for a made-up crime, and yet this wastepaper is still here. It was fate that it was left behind.”

Koshun put the paper he gathered back on the table and pointed to some of the letters on it. When Jusetsu read them, she gasped with surprise.

Ao.

Uren Niangniang.

The paper was so dirty that most of the text was illegible, but those two words were clear and readable. “Ao” must have referred to the ao god. Despite having had believers all across the land in ancient times, the great sea turtle god had suffered a decline in power—power which it had apparently now regained. The god had also been the object of worship for the Eight True Teachings religion.

“I shall get some people to look into this in detail. I’m not sure how much they will be able to ascertain from the thirty pieces of paper we have here, but we can’t afford not to try,” Koshun said. “...And for Keichu’s sake, as well.”

Jusetsu closed her eyes, then slowly opened them again. “We shouldn’t let just anyone look into it then. Leave this job to Senri.”

“The Winter Minister?”

“He was trying to guess why Keichu may have been executed, like you were. If it has to do with Uren Niangniang, asking the Winter Minister—Senri—to look into it is the wisest move.”

Koshun gave Jusetsu a small nod. “In that case, we shall do just that,” he said. It was decided.

Jusetsu looked at the papers once again.

What in the world could have been written on here?

Having entrusted Jusetsu with the task of giving the papers to Senri, Koshun returned to the inner court.

He entered a room in the Gyoko Palace, sat down on a divan, and sighed. Eisei was preparing some tea for him. The water boiled, and Koshun closed his eyes and waited for the tea’s fragrance to drift his way.

Suddenly, he felt like he could hear the sound of waves.

“...Ei, bring me the shell.”

“Yes, master,” his attendant replied.

Eisei brought over the giant sea snail shell—which sat on a piece of brocade fabric in the cabinet—holding it up reverently. He placed it on the table.

The shell was a rich, dark color, but it would glitter iridescently depending on from which angle you looked at it. Its unusual beauty was why it had been given as a gift to the emperor from Roko, Gei Province. It was even rumored that great sea snails were messengers of the god that created the Sea Edge Mirage—the mist at the edges of the sea.

The truth was this shell really *was* being used as a god’s messenger.

Koshun strained his eyes and called out the god’s name. “Owl,” he said.

“Oh, Summer Sovereign! Well, well, that’s one for the records—your voice finally got through to me.”

“More like your voice finally got through to *me*. Why don’t you call out for me more often?” Koshun asked.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m a *prisoner*. And then there’s the whole issue of the tides...” the Owl said, drifting off. “Anyway, did you need me for something?”

“Well, obviously. There’s so much I still need to know.”

“There is only so much I can tell you at any one time. I’ve got a prison guard on my case. Make it brief.”

How selfish, Koshun thought. He still felt somewhat put-off by the Owl’s attitude as he thought over what to say. What should he mention first?

“...Who is the ao god?”

“‘Ao’?” the Owl repeated in a skeptical-sounding tone of voice. There was a short pause. “Ao... Oh, I know you mean. The one who was severed into eight pieces and banished, right?”

He was talking about the god whose body had formed the country of Sho.

“Not that one,” Koshun said. “The one that’s said to have been *born* from that god.”

The ao god was said to have formed out of the corpse of a great sea turtle

god that had been chopped up and washed away.

“Oh, you must be talking about the White Turtle. I know nothing about that god,” said the Owl.

“How come?”

“It’s not from the Secluded Palace. I don’t know about the gods who were born over *there*.”

“What...? But the ao god...”

“You know my *abilities* are limited, so why expect me to *know* everything? I’m pretty sure I’ve told you that before. Sometimes, there are waves that stop me from getting involved with what goes on over there—just like when I’m talking to you through this shell, or when I sent my apparatus over there. There are times when I can see things clearly, and times when things don’t go quite so well,” said the Owl. “...But one thing I do know is that the White Turtle and the Raven don’t get along. But it’s not like she has any good friends over there to begin with. They all feud with one another...”

There was another short pause.

“No... Wait. Oh yeah, now I remember...” the Owl said, trailing off.

Koshun heard the sound of waves again, but he couldn’t hear the Owl’s voice very well.

“Owl?” he called out.

“Watch out for the White Turtle. It’ll demand a sacrifice.”

“A sacrifice?”

“A young girl... That’s why...”

Like the ebbing tide, the Owl’s voice became distant. It then faded away and disappeared altogether.

Although the Owl’s voice faded, the dark prophecy he left the emperor with did quite the opposite. The words continued to ring in Koshun’s ears.

It’ll demand a sacrifice.

Hakurai walked down to the beach, sat on some driftwood, and opened up his letter. It had come from the imperial estate—from Choyo.

As Choyo had told him, life on Pafan Island was comfortable. The fish were delicious, and there was plenty of fruit to eat. Only having one eye wasn't much of a hindrance there, although it did take Hakurai a while to learn to measure the distance between objects again.

Not only had the reward he received from Choyo far exceeded his expectations, but he even went as far as providing him with somewhere to hide. It was very generous of him. Naturally, however, this was Choyo's way of implicitly urging him to continue lending him a hand.

After setting his eyes on Hakurai as the founder of the Eight True Teachings—a religion based in Ga Province—Choyo sent him to his uncle to lure the older man toward self-destruction. An easily influenced individual, Choyo's uncle followed Hakurai's advice to the letter, something that became his downfall.

Hakurai didn't know very much about Choyo, and Choyo didn't know everything there was to know about Hakurai either. They were just convenient collaborators for one another.

Uren Niangniang was weak.

He had heard lots of different things about Uren Niangniang and the Raven Consort from the ao god—or Hakumyoshi—through Injo. If Uren Niangniang was weak, Hakurai suspected there wouldn't be any value in the Raven Consort being around any longer. He didn't know how Choyo had taken that news, however.

That being said...

Hakurai touched his left eyelid, now covered with a cloth. It was the injury he sustained when the curse he put on the Raven Consort was reversed. He never expected her to break it, but he supposed he could take the fact that he survived the reversal of a life-threatening curse as evidence that the Raven Consort's power was waning.

Hakurai gazed at the letter with his remaining eye, his right. He knew that Choyo had gone to the imperial capital, but he didn't know what his goal was in

doing so. *It can't just be to gift the emperor silkworm eggs*, he thought—and it sounded like his judgment was correct.

"Come to the imperial capital," Choyo wrote in his letter. It wasn't an order, but Choyo definitely believed that there was no way Hakurai would refuse. After all, he was the one who provided this hideaway for him.

If I were alone, I wouldn't care if I were forced out of here, but...

Hakurai glanced over at the water's edge. Injo had been tirelessly enjoying picking up shells. Piles of them were already building up inside the house.

He let out a sigh and shoved the letter into his breast pocket. Choyo hadn't written anything else in the letter besides telling Hakurai to come.

Standing up, he went over to the shore. "It's time to go home," Hakurai announced.

Injo had been crouching down as she washed shells in the sea water. She looked back at him. "I didn't find anything very good today," she said, showing him the shells in the palm of her hands with disappointment.

"You collect them every single day. You've probably gotten all the good ones already."

"But more wash up on the shore every day. I'm not going to run out." She puffed her cheeks out indignantly.

She really is just a kid, Hakurai thought.

Children in Injo's hometown of Roko sold shells in inn towns to make a living. Telling her that she didn't need to collect shells anymore didn't make any difference—it was like second nature to her. She had no intention of giving it up.

"Some nicer shells might get washed up here tomorrow," Hakurai suggested.

Injo smiled, looking pleased.

Oh, I almost forgot, Hakurai thought. *I have to go to the imperial capital.*

He couldn't leave Injo behind on her own, but travelling with a child did seem like it would be more trouble.

“Inj—”

Just as Hakurai was about to explain that they would be going to the imperial capital, he heard a sound coming from the pier to the left. It sounded like a child jeering. When he looked that way, he saw some young boys—aged from ten to twelve or thirteen—running about.

The pier was a crude piece of wood bound with rope, and a small boat was moored there. The boys were running on the beach in front of it. Or rather, some other boys seemed to have stolen another boy's bag and were teasing him. It seemed like the purse had money in it as it jingled every time it was thrown up into the air.

The one boy, probably around twelve, was tanned and slender, but it seemed like he was rather strong. He was giving the boys who had his bag an angry glare. His hairstyle and clothing were different from the others—he clearly wasn't from this island.

...He must be a sea dweller.

Hakurai looked across the water. A few huts had been constructed out at sea and there were small boats bobbing about. Those with no fixed abode and who moved from shore to shore were called sea dwellers. They made their livings from fishing and magic, and they inspired both awe and disdain from those who lived on the land. Even so, people depended on their magic in remote areas where there weren't any proper doctors. It wasn't magic of the ordinary kind—they mostly provided medicines and medical insights, so their flavor of magic would be better described as healing skills. In ancient times, doctors used to be called witch doctors, and these magic abilities and healing skills were that same category. In remote regions, they were still not considered separate from one another. These people told fortunes and used magic as well, providing people with medicine and performing esoteric arts.

Naturally, there were several different tribes of sea-dwelling people. There were actually some who used magic abilities exclusively, and members of those could be very powerful. From time to time, those people were even known to bring about disaster...

The sea dweller boy let out an animalistic snarl and hurled himself at the boy

with his bag. He quickly got hold of it and used his other hand to smack the boy now underneath him as hard as he could. A scream rang out. The other boys ran up to them in a panic, but no matter how much they hit and kicked him, the sea dweller wouldn't stop hitting their friend.

...When one person was faced with numerous opponents, the usual tactic was to swiftly and thoroughly injure the strongest one. The others didn't matter. Once you knocked the fiercest challenger down, the rest would lose heart, anyway.

"That kid's strong," said Injo as she blankly watched the fight unfold. She seemed indifferent toward those around her in general. The only things she showed any interest in were related to shells or her hometown.

Hakurai walked over to the boys. That one boy might have been strong, but he was outnumbered—and as one might expect, he was running out of steam. The other children wouldn't know when they took things too far, so they could end up beating him to death if they weren't careful.

And as much of a nuisance as it was to have to interfere, Hakurai wouldn't be able to forgive himself if he left that boy to die.

"Stop that," he said simply.

Hakurai grabbed the sea dweller boy by the arm and pulled him out from the scuffle. Upon seeing an adult, the boys drew back their fists, startled.

Things only got worse when they looked up and saw Hakurai's face.

"It's the sorcerer from the headland!" they yelled, backing away.

"Haven't your parents told you that it's bad luck to bother strangers?"

Hakurai gave each of the boys a sharp glare in turn. All of them were pale with fear. The boy in the back, who looked to be the youngest, practically leaped into the air to make his escape. The rest then panicked and started running away.

Hakurai looked down at the sea dweller boy. He was clutching his bag and staring up at Hakurai. His hair, tinged brown in the sunlight and sea breeze, was tied loosely at the back. He wore a tight-sleeved burlap top with shorts turned up at the hem. His feet were bare. He wore a thin cord at his ankle with a

decoration made from a shell carved into the shape of a ring attached to it. That type of ornament often was worn by drifters, and sea dwellers often wore those accessories. The shape of the shells differed depending on which tribe someone was from, as did the way that the cord was tied. For example, the most senior member of a clan tended to wear something large, like a bracelet made out of a large conch shell, or a necklace made from a great green turban shell.

Suddenly, the boy's gaze softened. Hakurai was still gripping his arm, but the boy was looking at Hakurai's wrist instead.

"...You're a sea swallow too," the boy said. "What tribe are you from? I'm from the Dako tribe."

Sea dwellers called themselves sea swallows—they were swallows who travelled the ocean as they pleased.

Hakurai wore a cord around his wrist with a shell carved into a diamond shape attached to it.

The man let go of the boy and pulled down his jacket sleeve. "My tribe is already extinct. You wouldn't know it, even if I told you."

Why had he answered like that? Hakurai never revealed his own identity to others. Just why had he broken up the boys' skirmish, even though it was a hassle for him to do so? Usually, he just would have let them get on with it.

Was it because the boy was one of his own? Because he was a sea swallow too?

Hakurai nodded toward the small boat. "Go back and be with everybody else. It's about time you moved to another beach, isn't it?"

If this boy got on the wrong side of the land dwellers, trouble would ensue. The young boy nodded and ran over to the boat. He masterfully wielded the oars, and the vessel was at sea in no time. As Hakurai watched him sail away, he found himself subconsciously brushing his hand against his wrist, gently stroking the shell decoration with his fingertips.



The Forbidden Color

AND SO THE AO GOD split the sea, causing the waves to surge and Uren Niangniang to languish in its stormy waters.

“Thank you very much for your help the other day, Raven Consort.”

As Jusetsu was leaving the outer court and heading up to the Kio Gate, a woman ran up to her. She was a court lady who had asked Jusetsu for help locating a missing item. After thanking her profusely over and over again, the woman went back to the palace where she worked.

That sort of thing was happening with increasing frequency as of late. As the court lady walked away, Jusetsu noticed that she had decorative string hanging from her belt. But what drew Jusetsu’s attention to it was the fact that the string appeared to be black.

“You don’t see people wearing black strings as accessories very often,” she muttered casually.

“That’s a symbol that followers of the Raven Consort wear,” explained Tankai, who was walking behind her.

“Followers...? What do you mean?”

“I’ve mentioned it before, but you’re getting more visitors and presents recently, aren’t you? There’s a whole group of people out there who worship you now.”

What in the world? Jusetsu thought.

“It’s the same as making a god out of you. You know, like the court ladies who pay visits to that silkworm grave. One lady-in-waiting wears a fish-shaped decoration, rather than a decorative string like that. To copy you.”

Jusetsu knew about that woman. He was talking about Ki Senjo, one of the ladies-in-waiting from the Hakkaku Palace. After getting rid of the hanging ornament that proved she was a follower of the Eight True Teachings, she swapped it for a fish instead.

...Do I really have followers now?

It was difficult to laugh it off as something silly. Even if it *was* a passing fad, how many of them were there?

Reijo's motto came to her mind: The Raven Consort was supposed to be alone. She wasn't supposed to have people gather around her. They could become her associates, her conspirators, and would eventually grow to huge numbers.

"I hear they call you 'Black-robed Niangniang' because you're always dressed in that black robe."

It wasn't a forbidden color as such, but since black was the color of Uren Niangniang, the general public avoided using it. Putting that aside, it was costly and time-consuming to dye things that shade. Hardly anyone would go to those lengths to dye their robe such a taboo color.

"Don't tell niangniang anything she shouldn't be hearing, Tankai," Onkei admonished him—perhaps out of concern for Jusetsu, who had gone quiet.

"It's not something she 'shouldn't be hearing.' Her knowing about it isn't going to hurt," Tankai countered.

"She doesn't need to know everything there is to know. Don't aggravate her unnecessarily."

"You..."

"Onkei, Tankai," Jusetsu called out, still looking ahead.

The two of them instantly shut their mouths.

"...I'm not going to take on any new requests for a while. If anybody comes, refuse to let them enter."

After issuing that order to the pair, Jusetsu hurried on ahead.

Jusetsu was standing in front of the Winter Ministry. She had hurried because Senri called for her.

She entered the palace building and found that Koshun was already inside. He was sitting at the side of a large table with Senri standing beside him. A paper

scroll was laid out on top.

Soft sunlight poured in through the lattice window, brightly illuminating the inside of the room. It was coming in at a different angle than it did in the summer, and was probably why the sunlight was so faint and pure. It looked like could break apart at any moment, its rays reminding Jusetsu of the thin wings of a damselfly.

“We’ve rewritten as much of it as we could decipher and had a scroll made. The only bits that are left blank are where the letters were impossible to read. Some of the stories contained in these thirty pages were connected, and others were completely unrelated, but we put them all together in one scroll so that they wouldn’t get scattered about and lost.”

As Senri explained this, he spread out the scroll again, this time for Jusetsu.

“The stories transcribed here are some of the mysterious tales that were circulating at the time...including so-called tales of the strange, divination texts, ancient songs, and myths—particularly myths that were not passed down to the present day. It is thought that there were many stories and legends that were lost as dynasties came and went. In that sense, what we have our hands on here is a very valuable artifact,” said Senri. “And it’s even more valuable in terms of what it can tell us about Uren Niangniang.”

Senri unrolled the scroll further and pointed to a line with his finger.

““And so the ao god split the sea, causing the waves to surge and Uren Niangniang to languish in its stormy waters,”” he recited. “...It talks about a battle between the ao god and Uren Niangniang.”

“A battle...?” whispered Jusetsu.

“We’re missing the beginning and the end of the story, so there are some parts we don’t know, but this seems to have been in the era of the Zen kingdom—near the beginning of the warring period.”

After the Summer Sovereign killed the Winter Sovereign, the country fell into a period of turmoil. Numerous kings rose and fell from power, and King Zen was one such king. To tell the truth, Jusetsu didn’t remember the names of all the kings from that time.

“In other words, it took place approximately a thousand years ago.”

“A thousand years...” Jusetsu felt like she’d heard that nice round number mentioned somewhere before, but where?

“There’s a clear description of the battle that took place here. The two gods fought at sea in an evenly matched battle. The ao god created raging waves, while Uren Niangniang created violent winds to fight back. Stones shot out of the water at Uren Niangniang, and the gales became a blade and sliced through the ao god. Mountains erupted in fire and arrows of lightning fell down on the land. And the two deities both exhausted their powers.”

“They *both* did?”

“Yes,” Senri replied. “The ao god sunk into the western sea, and Uren Niangniang was submerged in the eastern sea. According to this, the battle between the two gods was so fierce that it even caused Ikahi Island to sink.”

Ikahi Island...

That island used to be situated between Sho and Kakami and had been useful for trade routes. At some point, however, it had sunk.

“The aforementioned description of a mountain erupting into fire suggests that a volcano on Ikahi Island may have erupted, and it sank as a result. And there’s more...”

Senri pointed to the next part and began reading it out.

“‘Uren Niangniang cut off half of her own body. It flew up the top of a mountain to flee. The mountain was called Mt. Fukushi. The other half of her body turned into a black feather long sword and sank to the bottom of the sea. In that very same year, King Zen was killed by a traitorous vassal.’ So after exhausting all of her strength, Uren Niangniang’s body was split into two pieces before half sank into the depths of the ocean... This is an extremely important description that we cannot afford to disregard. By splitting her body in two, Uren Niangniang was able to avoid completely sinking beneath the water. To put it another way, the version of Uren Niangniang who exists in the present day only possesses *half* a body. This may be the reason why Uren Niangniang is weak.”

Senri's voice was as calm as it usually was, but there was a fervor in his words that he just couldn't hide—probably because the evidence supported the theory that he'd been advocating.

The gods' fight for supremacy, the decline of divine strength, and the reason why no Winter Sovereign appeared for so many years after the age of turmoil began was probably because Uren Niangniang herself was also in crisis.

"Was that why no new Winter Sovereign appeared until the first Raven Consort, Kosho, came onto the scene...?" Jusetsu asked. It sounded more like she was asking this question to herself.

"I believe so." Senri nodded. "You told me that Ui, the keeper of the treasure vault, told you that the ao god had been in hiding, did you not?"

"That's right." Ui was the smooth-featured eunuch who used to act as the treasure vault's keeper. His true form was that of an apparatus created by the ao god. He claimed that he ended up as Uren Niangniang's apparatus instead since the ao god was in hiding. However, he announced that the ao god summoned him once again—and with that, he disappeared.

"That's what this section is talking about. The ao god sank into the western sea, but unlike Uren Niangniang, the ao god sank in its entirety."

"And now it has come back to life?"

"We can't say whether there was a catalyst that caused it or whether it recovered its strength after all that time, but it would certainly seem so," Senri stated.

"Does that mean that the half of Uren Niangniang that sank in the eastern sea will also be revived?"

"It seems likely. The ao god has set a precedent for that...at least if we take what is written here as the truth."

Koshun, who had been quietly thinking to himself for all this time, cut in at last. "If there wasn't any truth to it, the emperor wouldn't have gone as far as sacrificing a life in order to conceal this information."

Senri nodded again. "I thought the same thing," he said.

“He must have wanted to hide the fact that Uren Niangniang was not complete—that she only had half her power. The Owl did seem to have an idea about a feud with the ao god as well.”

Jusetsu had a sudden realization at the mention of the “Owl.” She remembered now.

“A thousand years.”

Those three words fell from her lips, making both Koshun and Senri look over at her.

“The Owl said it when he was trying to kill me. He mentioned how impressive it was to have persevered for a thousand years.”

She realized he must have been talking about the thousand years that had passed since the Raven was injured in battle. The Owl had made no attempt to intervene when the Raven was banished for committing a crime. He’d just kept an eye on how she was doing over the years. But then, when he discovered she’d been horribly injured...that was when his thousand years of perseverance began.

Jusetsu gazed at the writing on the open scroll, not saying a word. She extended her hand and pointed at a line with her fingers.

“It says ‘half of her body turned into a black feather long sword and sank to the bottom of the sea.’ What *is* a ‘black feather long sword’?”

“I’m not certain about that,” admitted Senri. “Perhaps it’s a type of black sword known as a ‘feather,’ or perhaps it’s a metaphor for something else...?”

“Either way, half of Uren Niangniang’s body sank to the bottom of the eastern sea.” Jusetsu looked up at him. “Senri, what will happen if that half comes back to life?”

Senri frowned. “It’s impossible to say. If the ao god has regained enough power to take back one of its apparatuses when it came back to life, then Uren Niangniang...”

Jusetsu clutched her chest. Kosho had shut Uren Niangniang away inside the Raven Consort’s body. How was such a thing possible? How had a mere shrine

maiden managed to force a being powerful enough to be called a god to surrender—even if it was thanks to Uren Niangniang’s weakened state?

“...Would it even be possible to keep her shut away anymore?” Jusetsu couldn’t imagine that Uren Niangniang would remain confined to a human’s body once she regained her power. “Maybe the Raven would be set free...”

“Nevertheless,” Senri began, the look on his face becoming more and more troubled. “The way in which the Raven would be liberated will not necessarily be safe for you.”

Jusetsu thought of Shogetsu, the Owl’s apparatus. He had simply turned into a pile of feathers that scattered on the ground. Maybe that was how a vessel met their end.

“However, this does provide us with one ray of hope,” said Jusetsu, looking down at the scroll again.

Yes. There *was* a ray of hope. Because after all, until now, they hadn’t even unearthed one means of freeing the Raven.

Senri looked at Koshun, either distressed or eager to hear his thoughts.

“...Indeed, that may be the only way to release the Raven and save the Raven Consort,” Koshun said quietly and calmly, keeping his true feelings about the issue unclear. “Even so, we don’t know how the rest of Uren Niangniang can be revived. If the ao god really did regain its strength over the passage of time, will the same happen with Uren Niangniang in the near future? Or will things not work the same way? Perhaps the other half of Uren Niangniang won’t be able to come back to life without assistance...”

Then, Koshun revealed that there was one thing that concerned him.

“The Owl told me that the turtle god would ask for a sacrifice,” he said.

“A sacrifice?” Jusetsu furrowed her brow. “Meaning a human sacrifice?”

“He warned me about the ao god, so Uren Niangniang...must be a different sort. Perhaps that’s the difference between gods from the Secluded Palace, and those that were born over here.”

“Indeed, there are records about ceremonies where human sacrifices were

offered up to the ao god. Bronzeware and pictures engraved into stone that were used in the rituals were found in the ruins of old shrines. There are also journals recorded on bamboo writing strips that were discovered in tombs. All of these pieces of evidence appear to be from long ago, and there's no indication that such things are still being done at shrines to the ao god that exist today. However, I'm not so certain about remote areas," explained Senri. The man possessed great knowledge of religious practices throughout the country. "Ceremonies where human sacrifices, or livestock such as cows, were offered up were performed not just for the ao god. Human sacrifices were often presented to the lord of the river, or to the rainmaster... That is to say, the river god and the god of rainfall. These were ceremonies to quell flooding or to pray for rain. In the case of the ao god, human sacrifices were offered up to calm storms or to pray for plentiful catches of fish. Illustrations and legends about young girls throwing themselves into the rough waters can still be found today. There's no such evidence suggesting that such things happened at Uren Niangniang's shrines, however, and of course such acts are not carried out in the present day."

"The ao god sank into the sea. The sea is a place where many lives are created, but it's also a grave. Souls roam around in there. And there are also those who die in disasters at sea, I assume."

The ao god must have received no shortage of sacrifices. Could it have been that the god regained its power as a result of all of the people who had been served to it over the years?

"If the ao god still requires human sacrifices even after coming back to life, then..." Jusetsu murmured as she pondered to herself.

The ao god must have a shrine maiden now.

She remembered something that Ki Senjo, a former believer of the Eight True Teachings, mentioned to her. She'd talked about the ao god's—or rather, Hakumyoshi's—shrine maiden, Injo. Apparently, she was still just a little girl.

Now that Jusetsu had fallen silent, Koshun spoke up in her place.

"I don't know if Uren Niangniang, who does not require any sacrifices, will be able to recuperate her power down there in the sea, but she is definitely down

there at the bottom, isn't she? Couldn't we find her ourselves?"

"Find her, you say...?"

"If she turned into a long sword and sank to the bottom, we could seek her out."

Jusetsu refuted this. "That's easy enough to suggest, but we don't know where she's located. All we know is that she's somewhere in the eastern sea."

"There's a country called Ake on the eastern side of Sho. Overall, the sea to the east is smaller than on the western side. Also, the fact that Ikahi Island was affected suggests that she sank somewhere closer to the northern side."

"Still, it'd be like looking for a needle in a haystack... No, even *harder* than that."

"I'll ask the Owl if there's any way for us to locate her," Koshun said. "Or maybe that man will know where to find her."

Jusetsu almost asked who he was talking about, but then it clicked. "Ho Ichigyo?"

Koshun nodded. "It works out perfectly. Shall we go and ask?"

"Now?"

"I was planning on going to visit him anyway." Koshun pointed toward the lattice window. "Do you see that detached palace building? Everyone who works at the Winter Ministry lives there and there was room. I thought it would be the perfect place to move him. After all, it's not as if we could look after him in the inner court forever."

After a short pause, Jusetsu let out a quiet "Huh." After realizing it sounded silly, she cleared her throat, embarrassed.

"Ho Ichigyo is here?" she asked.

"He is."

"Are you planning on keeping him here?"

"I'm keeping him under surveillance. Well, it's not as if he's going to make an escape—but this a no-win, no-lose situation. Some of the Winter Ministry's

subordinates have medical knowledge too, so I have no worries on that front either. Let's be on our way," said Koshun casually before quickly making his way over to the door.

Despite being flustered, Senri carefully rolled up the scroll. "I must call somebody to show us on our way, so please be so kind as to wait a few moments, Your Majesty."

Koshun always appeared indifferent, showing no enthusiasm in anything he said or did. Occasionally, that meant that those around him were slow to react.

"You could afford to announce things in a slightly more grandiose manner," Jusetsu said.

"Grandiose? How?" asked Koshun.

"How...? Well, you could be more self-important in the way you express yourself."

"Like you do?"

Senri burst out laughing at that. Jusetsu glared at him. He apologized, but he was still trembling with laughter.

"Did I say something wrong?" Koshun asked, his face expressionless.

"Forget it." Jusetsu turned her face away in a huff and headed for the door.

The Winter Ministry subordinate that Senri summoned showed them the way to the palace building at the back. This subordinate was wearing a dull gray robe, the color of a winter sky. It was a very similar color to the robes that the eunuchs wore.

They followed him down the quiet, sunlit passage. The passages in the imperial estate may have been built in similar ways, but those in the inner palace had a certain splendor to them, with a lingering scent of makeup and the fragrance of flowers hanging in the air. The passages of the Koto Institute were vibrant and brimming with liveliness from the scholars who inhabited it. The passages here, however, were shrouded in a sense of calm and purity—yet there was also a sense of warmth, which must have been a reflection of the

character of the head of the ministry, Senri.

There were some modest plants growing in the courtyard that could be seen from the passage like an old maple tree, leopard plants, and rockfoils. It was clear that they were all being tended to properly. It was a quiet and pleasant garden, and Senri was always pleased whenever somebody complimented him on it.

The exterior of the palace building where Ho Ichigyo was staying looked to be more damaged than the others as its mud walls had fallen away in places and there were broken roof tiles covered with moss and grass. Inside, it was quite a different story. The furnishings in the small room were modest, consisting of a cabinet made of bare wood, a table, and a bed, but the room was clean and not dusty in the slightest. Koshun felt that its appearance was very typical of the Winter Ministry in that sense.

An elderly man was inside the room, lying on the bed.

“Your Majesty...”

Surprised to see Koshun enter the room, the old man started to get down from his bed, but Koshun stopped him.

“You can stay like that. I haven’t come to solicit gratitude,” the emperor said. “I want to ask you about something.”

“I see...”

The old man looked terribly small, with his wiry back arched and hunched over. *Is this really Ho Ichigyo?* Jusetsu thought, surprised. The only elderly people she had ever known were Reijo, Gyoei, and her aging servant, Keishi—all of whom possessed an imposing air of dignity. As such, she imagined Ho Ichigyo to be much the same. She hadn’t envisioned him to be such a miserable-looking old man—and there was no nicer way of putting it.

Ho Ichigyo wore a long, reddish-brown robe, and his dry, white hair was tied up in a small topknot which drooped down from his head.

“Jusetsu,” Koshun called out to her. She had stopped near the doorway but now walked up to the bed.

It was only then that Ho realized Jusetsu was there at all. He simply blinked blearily at the sight of her dressed in her black robe, not particularly surprised.

“You’ve gone as far as bringing the Raven Consort with you?” Ho looked down to avoid making eye contact with the girl in front of him. “Esteemed Raven Consort, I really didn’t have any idea that Shogetsu was trying to hurt you,” he said, his voice hoarse and frail. “I really didn’t...”

“I believe that to be no longer relevant,” Jusetsu asserted bluntly. For some reason, the sight of this extremely frail old man angered her. She wished that he would’ve taken a defiant attitude with her. The way he was acting now made her feel like *she* was the one treating him cruelly.

Ho stared fixedly at Jusetsu, bleary-eyed. “I must admit, you do bear a striking resemblance to the previous Raven Consort... No, not in terms of your facial features, but in the way you speak.”

Jusetsu remembered now—this man had previously been allowed access to the inner palace, and so would have been acquainted with Reijo.

“Were Reijo and yourself close?” she asked. “She was fairly knowledgeable when it came to shaman skills.”

“Indeed we were,” replied Ho, nodding repeatedly. “I was the one who taught her shaman magic. ...Perhaps ‘close’ may be an overstatement, but still.”

“...Is that right?”

“She was an unusual sort of Raven Consort. I think she may have lived longer than any that came before her. It was rare for Raven Consorts to live long lives, and most of them went to an early grave.”

“Why was that?” Koshun cut in.

“The nights when there was a new moon were too harsh for them to deal with. I don’t think that’s something anyone can endure for decades...”

On the nights when there was a new moon, the Raven would break out of her confinement in the Raven Consort’s body and drift around. As a result, the Raven Consort would experience pain so severe that it felt like her limbs were being torn off.

“And yet the previous Raven Consort was able to tolerate it?”

“She was an extremely strong-willed and courageous person,” Ho said. “She wanted to shoulder as much of the pain as she possibly could.”

...Reijo.

Jusetsu’s throat went tight. It was hard to breathe.

“She asked me to teach her shaman magic, saying that it would come in useful for lots of different things,” he continued. “Part of our job was to carry out surveillance on the Raven Consort so I couldn’t act friendly with her publicly, but...”

“Surveillance?” Jusetsu questioned him reprovingly.

“Yes...” Ho blinked.

“What do you mean by that?”

“We shamans who worked for the emperor acted as a shield against Uren Niangniang.”

“A shield?” *...That sounds familiar.*

“It acts as a defense against Uren Niangniang in case the worst should happen,” Ui had once said of the Goshi Palace. *“Just like the shamans. It’s a sort of ‘wall.’”*

“Both the shamans and the Goshi Palace...”

“Yes, that’s right. We existed in case Uren Niangniang or the Raven Consort rebelled against the Summer Sovereign. If that were to happen, it would have been our job to stop Uren Niangniang, along with the Raven Consort. That was why we were allowed to enter the inner palace.”

All of a sudden, Ho straightened his back right out, and his tone of voice became firmer. Jusetsu wondered if this was what he used to be like long ago, back when he worked for the emperor.

“Be that as it may, the Raven Consort is imprisoned in the inner palace, and is a solitary individual,” he continued. “Since we kept her under close surveillance, she was not able to assemble any followers to work under her. It was difficult

for the Raven Consort to succeed at anything by herself, regardless of the skills she possessed. Even if she wanted to escape from the imperial estate, Kosho raised spiritual barriers at its gates. She'd simply die if she went outside."

"Kosho's spiritual barriers?"

Jusetsu had been told that she'd die if she left the imperial estate, but naturally, she had never tried. Had any previous Raven Consort ever attempted to escape? They must have. There wouldn't be any legends about it otherwise.

"My knowledge is limited to the stories that we shamans passed around among ourselves, but..." Ho furrowed his brow, his face showing a hint of fear. "Kosho used her own fingers, or perhaps her toes, to form those spiritual barriers."

Silence fell over the room for a moment.

"Her fingers or toes...?" Jusetsu asked.

Koshun and Senri remained quiet and listened carefully to the pair's conversation unfold.

"I'm not sure which. All I've heard is that she used nine digits, one for each of the nine gates to the imperial estate."

She went that far?

A chill ran down Jusetsu's spine, and she trembled. It must have been Kosho's love for the first emperor of the Ran Dynasty, Ran Yu, that had driven her to do that. Could it even be called love at that point?

"To be accurate, she used nine of her digits as curse objects. Being objects that activate a curse, it's something more akin to magic than the art of creating a spiritual barrier. Kosho was the one who placed this curse, and I presume she was worried that the Raven Consort might defy the emperor once she died. We may have been in the inner palace to prevent that from happening, but so were the eunuchs. And then there's the matter of the Winter Ministers from the Winter Ministry. If they were so inclined, they could..."

"Wait. Why would the eunuchs be an issue?"

Ho looked intently at Jusetsu after she asked that. His eyes were old and

ashen.

“Did nobody tell you? You are not supposed to take in any eunuchs.”

“I know that. Reijo told me that the Raven Consort was supposed to be solitary.”

Ho nodded. “That’s because the Raven Consort must not attract any followers. There are people who could potentially become her followers,” he explained. “‘Gray robes are the symbol of Uren Niangniang’s manservants.’ You must be familiar with that notion.”

“Well, yes...”

Gray robes. Now that he mentioned it, Jusetsu remembered a certain question that started nagging at her after she met Ui for the first time.

...Why are eunuchs’ robes gray, anyway?

“Originally, eunuchs were Uren Niangniang’s manservants in the same way that those at the Winter Ministry are. If we were the emperor’s shield, they were the Raven Consort’s.”

“But eunuchs...” *Didn’t they exist to serve the emperor and his consorts?*

“I’m sure you’re familiar with the keeper of the treasure vault,” said Ho.

“Ui?” Jusetsu replied, although he wasn’t there anymore.

“He is a eunuch in the original sense—one with no gender who served the gods. I’ve heard that there were other people like that long ago. The eunuchs we know today—ones that start life as male—are mere imitations.”

Jusetsu couldn’t even bring herself to blink at that. Her mouth was dry.

“...But if modern eunuchs *are* imitations, then what harm could it do to have them by my side?” she asked.

“An ‘imitation’ is something that resembles the original. As individuals who have abandoned sexuality and worldly desires, they are the closest thing we have to the ministrants of a god. By their very nature, they *need* a god. Have you ever sensed that? They are scorned and have lost their sexuality, and when they die, they’re simply cast away. With nowhere else to turn for help, the

Raven Consort can easily become a source of support for them. And of course, the Raven Consort has her own talents...”

Ho stared intently into Jusetu’s eyes.

“The Raven Consort can have it all, if she so wishes. I’m sure you have the ability to make it happen.”

“...Ran Hyogetsu said the same thing,” she commented.

The sudden mention of this name made Ho’s expression falter. His eyes widened and his lip quivered.

“You...met Hyogetsu’s ghost?”

Jusetu explained the situation to Ho, who had been Hyogetsu’s mentor. He was extremely shaken by this revelation. Dejected, his straightened back contracted again. His face looked like that of a pitiful old man again, completely devoid of the dignity of a shaman who worked for the emperor that he had been presenting himself as until just a few moments ago. It was like that persona had never existed.

“Hyogetsu was roaming around as a ghost, was he? The poor thing.”

“He’s gone over to paradise now. No need to worry,” Jusetu said to that.

Ho’s face scrunched up with sadness, and he began to cry. “I... I ran away and left him to fend for himself. I was so scared of dying... I abandoned my own apprentice.”

“Don’t cry out of self-pity. It’s disgraceful,” Jusetu snapped bluntly.

Ho sniffled. “You two are so alike...”

“Reijo and me? You already said that.”

“No, you and the eunuch who came to arrest me,” he said.

“Eisei?” said Koshun.

“I don’t know his name.”

“I’m nothing like him,” Jusetu complained, frowning.

“Is that so...” said Ho, before going quiet.

“Anyway, you were talking about eunuchs,” said Jusetsu. “Continue.”

“Right. Now, where was I? Oh, yes, that was it—eunuchs are prone to positioning themselves as the Raven Consort’s manservants. During the previous dynasty, shamans prevented that from happening, but there are none around anymore.”

The emperor-before-last despised shamans and either drove them out or executed them.

“It’s extremely dangerous. From now on, the Raven Consort shall no longer behave in the same way as in the days of the previous dynasty.”

“Ho Ichigyo,” Koshun called out in a ceremonious manner.

“Yes, Your Majesty?” Ho responded respectfully.

“There is another reason why the Raven Consort ‘shall no longer behave in the same way.’”

Ho looked at him blankly. It didn’t seem like he understood what Koshun was saying. “What...?”

“The situation is different from how it was. The ao god has recuperated its power while Uren Niangniang is getting weaker and weaker,” he explained. “Did you know that half of Uren Niangniang’s body sank into the sea to the east?”

Ho was startled. “How do you know that?”

“We found a copy of some ancient texts that weren’t properly disposed of. The emperor at the time had them gotten rid of to conceal the fact that Uren Niangniang only had half of her power.”

“...That story was passed down orally to us. We were told never to divulge it to anybody else. Part of the reason for disposing of the texts was to hide the fact that Uren Niangniang had lost half of her body, but there was another reason as well.”

Ho looked at Jusetsu.

“If the Raven Consort were to come up with a plan to search for the other half of Uren Niangniang, it would cause trouble.”

“Why?”

“It’s thought that if Uren Niangniang were to take back the other half of her body, it would no longer be possible to keep her shut away inside the Raven Consort.”

That was what Jusetu had thought too.

“Is it something that even could be located, though?”

“The fact that such a fear exists suggests that it must be a possibility—for the Raven Consort at least,” said Ho. “...Do you know why Uren Niangniang breaks out of the Raven Consort’s body every time there is a new moon?”

Koshun looked to Jusetu, who turned toward Ho.

“Isn’t it because that is when she is set free?”

“It’s because she is searching for the other half of her body.”

Oh. Jusetu exhaled. *So that’s the reason.* That was why she flew all over the place, all while putting Jusetu through the most excruciating pain possible.

“...I see.” Koshun crossed his arms and pondered to himself. Jusetu couldn’t say for certain what he was thinking. “Well, what do you know about the ao god?”

“The ao god is, in a sense, the forefather of us shamans. It is said that he was the one who taught us our skills. The ao god imbued his skills in one young man, and that young man went on to systemize it in the form of shaman magic and taught it to others. That was how shamans were born, if the story is anything to go by... The first emperor is said to have been a descendant of the ao god himself, which may have been why shamans served the dynasty since the very beginning. The Goshi Palace has the divine protection of the ao god, who was also the one who blessed us with our skills. That is why that palace, along with the shamans, form a shield against Uren Niangniang.”

Ho’s speech was gentle, resembling that of an old man reciting an ancient legend to a little child—but there was a sternness to it too.

“The ao god is the old, primordial god, and has been in people’s lives since the primitive, barbarous ages. It started off as the guardian deity of sea voyages,

and people prayed to the god for plentiful catches of fish, but it gradually came to be worshipped as the god of longevity. I believe that to be evidence that this started as a fisherman's religion, which then migrated inland. People in landlocked areas wouldn't have had any need for plentiful catches of fish or protection on the water, so the religion then took on the form of something more vague—prolonging one's life. As time goes on, people's lifestyles change, the form of their belief changes, and eventually, ancient gods are forgotten altogether. Some fascinating pieces of folklore related to the ao god can be found in a Songbird Troupe song, actually..."

Songbird Troupes were groups of entertainers in this land. Onkei had belonged to one such group originally. Jusetsu had heard that they began working as oracles who went around coastal areas praying for good catches of fish.

Ho began singing a song to himself. It was a chant with peculiar melody and antiquated language, and one that had been performed time and time again from the country's formation until the first emperor ascended the throne.

When the moonlight fell on the sea

Two gods were begotten

One was the god of shade

One was the god of light

After eight thousand nights at the edge of the sea

The first god conceals itself in the black palace building

The second god frolics as it dances and sings along to the music

The first in the Secluded Palace, the second in the Palace of Paradise

There is a god that was born from the water gate of the Secluded Palace

Its name, the great turtle god

Its body hewn into eight as penance for its crime

It was exiled from the Secluded Palace

Its head became Je

Its arm became Pafan

Its leg turned into Guruu

Mountains and valleys formed from its shell

Its blood turned into rivers

Its eyeballs turned into swamps

Its breath created whirlpools and gave rise to the currents of the sea

Ears of rice dropped grew on its rotting flesh and dropped their seeds

Mulberry and silkworms grew

And people were born

And then, from a single piece of bone was created the white turtle god,

known as the ao god

A god to calm the stormy seas and protects our boats

Eight generations after the ao god, the White King was born

That is, he who they call the first emperor...

After singing this, Ho had a coughing fit. Senri brought Ho's jacket over from his chair and put it around his shoulders.

"Try not to let yourself get cold. I shall bring you a decoction."

"I'm sorry," Ho said as he had another coughing spell.

Being prone to illness himself, Senri was used to dealing with this sort of thing.

"That's enough for today. We shall visit you another time," Koshun said curtly, before heading over to the doorway.

Jusetsu stared at Ho, who was all hunched over. "...Who would have thought that even an old man with your wisdom and experience would not be able to handle the guilt of running away for fear of dying?"

It was exactly what Jusetsu had done when she was a little girl.

Ho looked up at Jusetsu questioningly. The dejected old man must have angered Jusetsu so much because she could see her own weak self in him.

"I don't know what twist of fate has led you to this point, but whatever it is, I now possess a great deal of knowledge thanks to the fact that you've survived," she said. "Who are we to decide what is for the best?"

Ho blinked at her.

"There are still more questions I would like to ask you in the future. Take care."

With that, Jusetsu left the room. Koshun had left ahead of her and was waiting in the passage. As she walked over to him, she realized something. *You never know what might end up being fortunate, or what is going to lead to*

misfortune. Something that was lucky in the present may end up turning into a disaster further down the line. Nothing was ever set in stone.

In that case, the only thing you could be certain about was making your own decisions—even if those decisions may not have been the right ones.

If you decided something yourself, the only thing that was guaranteed was the fact that *you* made that choice, not the outcome. That one choice would then be nothing more than a single channel marker in a vast ocean of things that you couldn't change.

Even after finding out the truth about Uren Niangniang, Jusetsu continued to spend her days in the Yamei Palace as she usually did. No, there was one difference—she was refraining from taking on requests from people in the inner palace. She couldn't let this religion surrounding her—in which her followers called her the “Black-robed Niangniang”—become any more popular than it already was. An endless stream of visitors turned up every night, but she got Onkei and Tankai to send away every single one of them.

Even so, there was another problem.

“There's something I'd like to request of you, if you'd be so kind as to—”

Even if she drove her nightly visitors away, people would implore her to help them as she walked around the inner palace. Jusetsu was perplexed. Regardless of how many followers she may have accumulated, it seemed strange that this would start happening all of a sudden.

“Perhaps I should remain cooped up in the Yamei Palace for a while...” she mumbled to herself as she was on her way back from returning some texts she borrowed from Kajo.

At that moment, however, another court lady interrupted her.

“Raven Consort,” she said.

Onkei tried to head her off, but the court lady cried out imploringly, undeterred.

“If you won't take on my request, would you at *least* be so kind as to give me

one of your lucky talismans?" she asked.

Jusetsu stopped in her tracks and look around. "...Lucky talismans?"

"I've seen that some of the court ladies and eunuchs at the palace I work for have them. Lucky talismans that ward off disaster."

She must have been talking about lucky talismans that warded off evil spirits. Of course, Jusetsu had given these out before, but she hadn't written out any lucky talismans recently.

What is this all about?

"Those aren't talismans that I've written."

"What...?"

Jusetsu broke away from the court lady and quickly made her way back to the Yamei Palace.

"How strange," she murmured.

"What is?" Tankai asked.

"The lucky talismans?" said Onkei.

"Well, that as well...but don't things seem peculiar as of late? There are *far* too many people requesting my help all of a sudden, regardless of what the circumstances may be," she said.

Tankai didn't seem to find it particularly abnormal. "Isn't that just how these things go? It's like a fever."

Onkei, on the other hand, had a serious expression on his face and appeared to be taking Jusetsu's words very seriously.

"Do you believe there is somebody fanning the flames?" he asked.

"Well, I don't know whether it's deliberate or not, but..."

"I'm sure there are some who are spreading the word out of the goodness of their hearts. You could say that they are helping to fan the flames in some way. But there are, on the other hand, others who sell counterfeit lucky talismans."

"They *must* be counterfeit."

“There’s no shortage of people who’d *think* of such a business idea. However...” Onkei went on to put forward another counterargument. “I imagine those who possess the knowledge to be able to *make* such a talisman to be few and far between.”

“Couldn’t they just copy out a lucky talisman they’d gotten from somewhere else, without really knowing what they were doing? But then again, they would need a great deal of paper, so I assume they’d need to be wealthy...”

“Shall I look into this issue, niangniang?” Onkei asked.

“Yes... I suppose you should. We can’t simply allow this to continue.”

“I shall investigate whether there is someone fanning the flames, then,” said Onkei. “Tankai, it’s your job to look into the counterfeit lucky talismans.”

“I *hate* getting orders from you,” he complained.

“Listen to what Onkei tells you, Tankai,” Jusetu instructed.

Tankai’s demeanor suddenly flipped, and he gave her a great big smile. “Understood, niangniang!”

Onkei let out a deep sigh.

When they returned to the Yamei Palace, Jiujiu came running over, as if she couldn’t wait a moment longer to say what she had to say.

“Niangniang, a lady-in-waiting just visited from the Hakkaku Palace to say that the Crane Consort would like to invite you out.”

“What? Banka?”

“She’s inviting you to have tea with her, but not at the Hakkaku Palace. She wants to invite you to the Samon Palace, in the outer court.”

“The outer court? What for?”

“Banka’s father and her brothers are currently staying there, so she is visiting the palace from time to time.”

Saname Choyo? Why would Banka invite her there for tea, of all places?

“Where is the Samon Palace?” Jusetu asked.

“I’m not especially familiar with the outer court either. A eunuch from the Hakkaku Palace has been waiting outside to show you the way there.”

“I see...”

...*Oh dear*, Jusetu thought to herself. Onkei and Tankai had already left to commence their investigations, so they weren’t around.

Maybe Jusetu didn’t have enough bodyguards after all. Banka *had* told her to be careful around Choyo, but...there wasn’t much she could do.

“Okay. I shall go on my way.”

“Is anybody accompanying you?” Jiujiu asked.

“I will take Onkei with me.”

After telling Jiujiu that lie, Jusetu entered the woodland that surrounded the Yamei Palace and looked up at the sky. The evergreen bay trees were flourishing, their leaves blocking out the sun. They were a more subdued shade of green than they had been in the summer and appeared to have lost some of their moisture.

“...Sumaru,” Jusetu called out to the star raven.

The voice travelled through the dingy shadows of the woodland, and she soon heard the sound of wings and a strident cry. The bird then appeared, accompanied by the sound of its wings fluttering. It had a body that looked like it was a piece that had been cut straight out of a starry night sky.

Jusetu stretched out her hand and Sumaru swooped down onto it. It let out another call—an affectionate one this time.

“I’m going to take one of your feathers.”

Jusetu put her fingers into the plumage on the bird’s wing. A brown feather with white spots slipped easily into her hand without her even needing to pull.

“You may go now.”

Jusetu waved her arm and Sumaru took flight. With the feather tucked close to her chest like a lucky talisman, Jusetu went back to the palace building once

more. Then she headed to the Samon Palace alongside the eunuch who was showing her the way.

The Samon Palace was on the southwest side of the outer court. It was a magnificent piece of architecture, assumably because it was meant to be used by visitors to the imperial estate. It had high mud walls around the outside with splendid clay tiles on top. Even its gate gave off an imposing impression. On the other side of this gate stood a palace building with a roof covered with glossy blue glazed tiles and adorned with decorative ones modelled after fish fins and tails. Lanterns featuring intricate fretwork hung from the eaves, swaying in the crisp breeze. It was a far cry from the Winter Ministry complex.

When Jusetsu passed through its gate, the eunuch who guided her to the palace immediately climbed the steps to the main building. Rather than going inside, he started walking down the outer passage to the right. The two of them went down the eastern passage and the eunuch guided Jusetsu toward the back. He explained that this was where a palace building that faced out onto a garden with a beautiful view was located. Before too long, a pond came into view. Jusetsu stopped and gazed at it for a moment. On the other side of the rippling water stood numerous trees. It felt like she was looking at a mountain that was covered in dense foliage. Several peculiarly shaped rocks were positioned inside the pond to add flair. A man was standing by himself in front of the pond, his back toward Jusetsu and the eunuch.

...Who's that?

The man, or so Jusetsu assumed due to his stature, was dressed in unusual attire. He was broad-shouldered with a tall, slim frame and dressed in a long, light brown robe with a flax-colored sleeveless jacket on top. His upper garment was covered in elaborate embroidery using thread of all different colors. Even his belt was embroidered in the same way, with trim hanging down from the edges. Jusetsu couldn't tell what he looked like—not because she was looking at him from behind, but because his entire face was covered with a cloth. It wasn't the sort of silk veil that ladies of status would wear when they went out. Jusetsu wondered how he was able to see in front of him with such a thing over his head. As one would expect from the rest of his outfit, this cloth was

embroidered as well, with small gemstone and lapis lazuli decorations dangling from the edges. His long, braided black hair peeked out from behind the fabric, and it had string woven into it as well.

Jusetsu had never seen anyone who looked anything like him before. *That's not Choyo*, she thought—but he didn't look like an attendant either. Was he from another country?

"Please, do come this way," the man said, not turning around.

Jusetsu was startled by his voice. It was one of a man in the prime of his life, perhaps in his thirties or forties. Before she knew it, Jusetsu's eunuch guide was gone. She went down the steps from the passage and over to the pond, keeping her distance from the stranger.

The decorations attached to the thin cloth the man was wearing over his head rustled slightly. It took Jusetsu a moment to realize that it was because he was laughing.

"Hah, you seem worried. There's no need to be on guard—I'm not going to do anything to you. I simply called you here to talk."

Jusetsu felt uncomfortable, like something was making her skin crawl. What was it? Her intuition told her to be vigilant and reject this man. Had she met him before? Certainly she couldn't have, but still...

"*You* called me, you say? Where is Banka, then?"

"Banka is at the Hakkaku Palace. She knows nothing of this. I asked one of her ladies-in-waiting to do me a favor and invite you here."

"Who *are* you?" Jusetsu asked. "A close associate of Choyo's?"

If he wasn't close to Choyo, he wouldn't have been able to enlist the help of Banka's ladies-in-waiting so easily, nor would her ladies-in-waiting have even listened to his request.

The man laughed again. "No, I wouldn't call us close... We're simply acquaintances. My name is Gyokugan, a star-gatherer from Uka—that is to say, a conjurer."

Uka was a small country in the south, across the sea. The only thing Jusetsu

knew about it was its name. Was he *really* from that place? She was skeptical.

“Why would somebody of your description be here? What do you want from me?”

“As I said, I want to talk.”

“About what?”

Jusetsu repeated her questioning in an attempt to cut him down. She felt as if he was going to entrap her if she didn’t. Why did she find this man so unpleasant? There was definitely something off about him...

His voice sounded like it was crawling up from beneath her feet. “I want to talk to you about a curse.”

By the time it clicked, it was too late.

A curse!

Something wrapped itself around her ankles—it felt like cold, bony hands. She tried to move, but she couldn’t budge an inch. Its fingers dug even harder into her skin, making her groan in pain. Its grip was so strong that it felt as if the force could break her bones. When she looked closely, Jusetsu realized that the ground had been dug up around the spot where she was standing. A gardener wouldn’t have done such a thing. Jusetsu had made a careless mistake—she was too distracted by the man’s unusual appearance to notice what was beneath her.

“What have you buried here?” she asked.

“Do you really need to ask? You already know. What else could it be but a curse object?” The man’s tone of voice changed. “I borrowed it from a corpse I came across, lying on the roadside on my journey here.”

He must have been talking about nails, hair, or teeth. It was a common practice to bury a curse object like those and make the target of the curse step on it.

“Are you...?”

The way she could sense this sinister, spine-tingling incantation at play. The way she felt hatred that chilled her to the bone. These sensations all felt

familiar to Jusetsu.

It wasn't, however, because she'd met the man in front of her before. It was because the incantation she sensed was one she'd come across before.

It was the toad incantation—the one that Banka had been afflicted by.

“You're Hakurai, aren't you?”

“Took you long enough to realize that,” he said. “I expected you'd figure that out as soon as we met.”

Hakurai slowly walked up to Jusetsu. She wondered how he was able to move forward so confidently with a cloth over his face. Did it have small eye holes in it? With the cloth being covered in embroidery, it was hard to tell.

Hakurai stopped in front of Jusetsu and stared fixedly at her. “I wasn't expecting you to be such a young girl, but you really are. Who would have thought that *this* was what the Raven Consort looked like?”

Hakurai crossed his fingers in front of his chest and the hands' grip on Jusetsu's ankles got noticeably tighter.

Jusetsu grimaced. “What's happening...? What in the world do you want from me? Do you resent me, even though you don't even know me?”

“I don't resent you, as such...but I would like it if you died,” he said. His words were empty of any real enthusiasm.

Naturally, Jusetsu was taken aback. “You what...? Doesn't that mean that you *do* resent me then?”

“I hold no resentment toward you as an individual. I do deem the Raven Consort, however, to be unnecessary. What use is Uren Niangniang, being as weak as she is? Why should she get to be waited on as the central figure of the nation when she doesn't even have her full power? I feel the one who holds the most power is meant to be the one who stands at the top.”

There was no ferocity to Hakurai's voice. He was speaking in an extremely flat voice, sounding almost bored. Jusetsu couldn't work out what his intentions were. He said he didn't resent her, and yet here he was, wishing death upon her. He had hurled a sinister curse at her, and still expressed no emotion.

“...Are you saying that I should concede that position to the ao god?”

Hakurai snorted. “I couldn’t care less about that. That’s just an afterthought. I simply dislike the idea of the Raven Consort, as do I dislike those who worship Uren Niangniang. Don’t you feel that you’re deceiving those people? Making them worship a weak god is far worse than anything the Eight True Teachings, for example, may have done. Am I wrong about that?”

Jusetsu gulped. She didn’t know how to respond—and she knew that was exactly what Hakurai wanted. Only this religious founder—who used the power of his words to turn the Eight True Teachings into something big—had been able to hit her where it hurt, leaving her unable to argue back.

...I need to pull myself together.

Her ankles were aching. It wouldn’t take much work to shake off a curse of this level, one that was simply designed to aggravate somebody. However, she couldn’t predict how things would play out with Hakurai once she did.

Is he planning on killing me here in this very spot? Or...

“So, why did you call me here?” she asked instead.

Hakurai went quiet, perhaps disappointed that Jusetsu didn’t take his bait. This told Jusetsu something—Hakurai was the sort of man who used words to drag people over to his camp. She couldn’t let him control the conversation.

“...As I told you before, I called you here to talk.”

“To talk... Is that to say you have a demand to make of me?”

It was highly unlikely that he just wanted to make small talk with her. By “talk,” he meant he was going to pressure her to comply with his demands. Either that, or he’d simply threaten her.

“I wanted to issue you with a warning. I’m telling you to stay cooped up inside the Yamei Palace and behave yourself. As long as you do that, your life won’t be taken from you, at least.”

“Is that a message from Saname Choyo?”

Hakurai didn’t answer her question, but it had to be.

“Forget staying cooped up and quiet in the Yamei Palace—you were the one who called me out here. Your words have no logic,” said Jusetsu, deliberately stirring things up.

“Not a very charming young girl, are you? You should be begging for your life in terror,” said Hakurai, seeming displeased. A shred of emotion was finally breaking through.

“Plead for my life? Me?” Jusetsu laughed. “Surely you’re the one who should be doing that.”

Jusetsu quickly shoved her hand into her breast pocket—to where she hid the feather she took from Sumaru. The moment she pulled it out, it transformed into a brown sword in her hand. She thrust it into the ground beneath her.

A spine-curdling moan rang out from below her feet. The curse that was binding Jusetsu’s ankles vanished. She pulled the sword out and immediately stepped forward and swung it upward, aiming for Hakurai’s head.

Hakurai jumped back and fell down on his knees. The cloth he was wearing over his head was slashed by Jusetsu’s sword and fell to the ground, revealing the man’s true face at long last.

“If you did want to talk, couldn’t you have least shown me yourself from the beginning? It’s very rude to hide.”

Hakurai was glaring at Jusetsu with his one long, narrow eye, while the other one was covered by the remaining part of the cloth. He had clean-cut features, but his lips were thin and pale. Her first impression of him was that he had a cold, stony look to him.

“I assume you lost that eye when I reversed that curse some time ago. How dare you talk about weakness after being defeated by me? You need to know your place,” Jusetsu spat out. Her words only served to make the look in Hakurai’s eye even harsher.

Yes, that was it—the hatred that had been present in his curse.

“Says you, a little girl who couldn’t even fully reverse it.”

The chills these words gave her were even more stomach-churning than the

wail of the corpse beneath her feet.

“You should be ashamed that you were only able to take away one of my eyes,” he continued. “Uren Niangniang is only going to become weaker. You should lose everything you have along with her and die.”

Jusetsu stared at Hakurai’s face. The man was getting more and more pale, yet his eye was ablaze. It looked like there were icy flames burning in his pupil. Jusetsu could remember seeing eyes like his before. Maybe everyone who harbored some sort of hatred had that kind of look.

“...Do you hate Uren Niangniang?” she asked.

“I hate everything about all of you,” Hakurai retorted. “I want you all to burn to ashes. Uren Niangniang, her believers, the Raven Consort, and all the citizens of this land.”

His statement raised a new question for Jusetsu. “Are you from a foreign country then?”

“No. I’m not from anywhere,” he replied. “I’m a sea swallow, from the Ani clan.”

“A sea swallow...?” Jusetsu asked.

All the energy drained from Hakurai’s expression. The look on his face now showed a mix of resignation and dejection. “Do no inlanders know about us?” he began. “I see... I suppose they don’t. My clan perished before I even knew it, gone just like a stone by the roadside or bubbles in the sea.”

“Were they wiped out?”

“Not as a punishment. There was no legal aspect to it. But every single one of them was murdered—by the people of your island, Sho.”

The intense loathing that had been present in Hakurai’s expression and voice had withered away, leaving only the quiet rage and sorrow that lingered underneath.

“The sea swallows are nomads. They have no fixed home and spend their days at sea. They fish, trade, and use magic and medicine. From time to time, they sell information. They move from shore to shore, building huts off the

coastline and mingling with those on the shore. They want rare items from foreign countries, precious corals, pearls, green turban shells, and medicine. Medicine and magic are one and the same. The people of the land feared us for the mysterious magic we used, but they wanted our medicines. Some people did ask us to use our magic—that was my specialty. Well, it still is,” said Hakurai, before taking a glance at Jusetsu. “Raven Consort. Have you ever done something you regretted so much that it made your heart bleed?”

Jusetsu gave him a hard look back. “I have,” she answered simply.

Hakurai turned his face toward the pond. Jusetsu could only see the cloth-covered side of his face where his left eye was.

“I keep thinking about how I shouldn’t have reversed that curse. I was twelve years old at the time. It was a curse plaguing a little girl, and the person who it was reversed on died. The one who was killed was the second wife of the girl’s father. Her brothers were furious. They incited the other people to action and lured my clan onto the beach to attack them...and that was that.” Hakurai’s mouth twisted, and he let out a slight laugh. “It is not wise to help somebody in trouble when you are a child, lacking in wisdom. I reversed the curse because I took pity on the little girl, but if I hadn’t done so, she would have been the only victim. Her father was the fishermen’s boss, and they had a splendid shrine to Uren Niangniang in their home. Even the villagers had lucky talismans requesting bountiful catches of fish from Uren Niangniang on their walls. I can still remember the black shadows of the villagers attacking my clan on the beach at night against their burning bonfire, looking like sinister crows. Those flames and their dancing shadows are forever etched into my memory. In that bonfire light, I saw hatchets being thrown over and over again. A woman being dragged along by her hair, a baby being thrown into the fire, heads being held up high, blood splattering everywhere... I was watching their silhouettes, those mere black shadows. While everyone from my clan was being chopped into pieces, humiliated, and burned alive, I simply watched from the water, all by myself. I was the only one left in our boat off the coast. I had been invited ashore on the premise that they were holding a feast to thank me for saving the young girl, but I didn’t go—not necessarily because I had a bad feeling about it, but I suppose, at the end of the day, I did. I rowed away in the cover of night

and made my escape. I kept on paddling with little more than the clothes on my back and no real food to eat. I eventually reached a small island where I was fortunate enough to be rescued by a Songbird Troupe.”

“A Songbird Troupe...”

“They have shamans among their ranks—although for the most part, their abilities aren’t anything more than issuing people with slips of paper telling their fortunes. It was helpful because I got to learn about shaman magic from scratch. My skills are a mix of magic that my clan used and shaman magic. The ao god was the originator of shaman magic, but the skills members of the Ani clan used began with the star god—the god of sea voyages. Born from the sea, the god travels through the sky and then returns to the waters where it came from. The fins of two fish, the first being Akaru and the second being Kakari, draw in the tide, meet it, turn the waves away, cut their way through them, make the moon set at the Palace of Paradise, and sink the shadows at the Secluded Palace...”

Halfway through Hakurai’s speech, Jusetsu pulled a flower out of her hair and blew on it before he got the chance to finish. She knew nothing of the Ani clan’s magic, but if someone was stringing together phrases that meant the opposite of another, they were definitely reciting a curse incantation. The lines he said, starting with “the fins of two fish,” were part of such a curse incantation.

The flower collapsed at the center, scattering its petals, which then billowed out like a wave and darted at Hakurai. The petals turned into fine, thin blades and slashed at his cheeks and cut his hands.

He hadn’t completed the spell—he knew that the waves of the curse he directed at Jusetsu were shattered halfway through.

Hakurai took a small bottle out of his breast pocket and splashed its contents over her. The black liquid appeared to disperse before transforming into a snake. It had an unpleasant smell to it, perhaps a mixture of blood and something else.

Was this something else cursed, intended to beguile her? Jusetsu backed away and chopped the snake’s head off in one fell swoop of her sword made of the star raven’s feather. The snake’s remains then turned into a black haze and

disappeared, a brisk breeze blowing through in its place.

“You are no match for me,” Jusetu stated.

Showing no sign of emotion, Hakurai replied, “It doesn’t matter if you beat me. There’s still the ao god.”

As soon as he said this, a pillar of water rose from the pond. Rather, several pillars sprung up one after another, sending spray all the way over to where Jusetu was standing. Jusetu wasn’t the only one who was surprised—Hakurai also looked up at the pillars of water in shock. This couldn’t have been his doing.

Hakurai looked back at the opposite side of the pond, where the palace building stood. There was a terrace protruding over the pond with a little girl standing on it. She was about ten years old and was dressed in a white silk ruqun. She had tanned skin and big, shining black eyes framed by thick eyelashes. Her loose hair swayed in the wind that the pillars of water had whipped up, and the droplets of water that had landed on her looked as if they were pearl hair decorations.

The little girl’s eyes were directed straight at Jusetu.

“Injo, stop...!” Hakurai called out angrily in an attempt to control her, but the girl’s expression remained unchanged.

Hakurai tutted. After calling out to her several more times, the girl finally blinked, and the pillars of water abated.

...So that’s Injo.

“A child like that?” said Jusetu with a frown.

Hakurai snorted. “I learned magic at the age of five. You must have been around the same age when you were brought to the inner palace.”

“That’s not what I’m saying. Are you *really* planning to offer up a girl so tiny as a sacrifice?”

Hakurai narrowed his eyes questioningly. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m asking you whether you’re going to use her as your human sacrifice for the ao god,” Jusetu said, clarifying.

“A human sacrifice...?” he asked.

“The ao god requires people as sacrifices. Young girls. Didn’t you know that?”

Hakurai went quiet. Then, just as he was about to speak again, another voice and the sound of footsteps interrupted him.

“Hey, what was that sound?”

Several figures appeared in the passage—a pair of young men. The one in front had loud footsteps and his clothes made noisy rustling sounds as he moved, whereas the one at the back—appearing to be the older of the two—was quiet in both of those respects. Jusetsu saw a resemblance to a girl she knew in both of these men, especially the younger one.

These must be the brothers that Banka told me about.

“I *knew* it had to be you, you jerk! What do you think you’re playing at?” the young man in the front lashed out, a stern look on his face.

He seemed to have something against Hakurai. He was an attractive young man, and his long, deep blue robe suited him perfectly. The other man behind him stood there with pursed lips, but it was clear from his knitted eyebrows that he wasn’t fond of Hakurai either. His long, smoked bamboo-colored garb seemed like the kind an elderly person would wear, but it looked strangely appropriate on him, with his appearance being as elegant as it was. Despite his distinguished appearance, however, there was something somewhat self-important about the look in his eyes—although perhaps noble would be a better description.

“What was my father thinking when... Huh?”

Hakurai looked toward Jusetsu, and the young man followed his line of sight and stopped talking mid-sentence. It looked like he finally noticed Jusetsu’s presence.

“Wh-who’s that?”

He was bewildered by the sight of the young woman, who was not only dressed in a black robe but also carrying a brown sword in one hand.

What a nuisance.

Jusetsu chucked the sword to the ground and turned away. As soon as Jusetsu let go of it, the sword turned back into the feather it once was.

“Hey, wait!”

She ignored his cry and made a run for it. Rather than going up onto the passage, she ran alongside it. She glanced at the young men and met the older one’s gaze, seeing his eyes widen slightly as she did so.

With no sign of anyone pursuing her, Jusetsu left through the gate. It didn’t seem like they ever had any intention of chasing after her, so she stopped to catch her breath for a moment. She looked up at Samon Palace and gazed at its roof tiles as she did so before quickly getting away from the place.

“That couldn’t have been one of the servants who works here... Was it a court lady? No, don’t tell me it was...” Ryo muttered, looking in the direction that the black-robed girl had run. Then he turned his face toward the pond and yelled. “Argh!”

Hakurai had already disappeared.

“That jerk...” Ryo grumbled, but since Hakurai was a “guest” that his father had invited, he wasn’t able to take a stronger stance than that.

Shin, however, said nothing as he went down the steps from the passage.

Shin and Ryo both realized that the foreign-seeming man who covered his face and suddenly showed up a short while ago had to be Hakurai, but they needed to feign ignorance in front of their father. To tell the truth, they didn’t understand what their father was thinking. What were his intentions in calling upon a man like that? They couldn’t sense the danger.

Shin stopped on the bank of the pond and bent over. A bird’s feather was lying there on the ground, the very one the girl in the black robe who was there a few minutes earlier had dropped. The feather was brown with white spots. What kind of bird could it have been from?

...She must have been a consort.

The way silver and gold were woven into her clothes, her numerous hairpins,

the dangling ornaments in her hair... Going by the standard of her attire, she couldn't be a court lady.

Even if she was a consort, there was something strange about the situation. Why had she been squaring off with Hakurai without a single lady-in-waiting with her? All while wearing a coal-black robe, with striking red lips in contrast with her pale skin, reminiscent of a solitary camellia blooming commandingly in the snow. Most striking of all, however, were her eyes. Strong and piercing, her raven-colored eyes were like wet obsidian. Looking into them was like peering into the darkness of the night. It was enough to make you forget to breathe.

In the dim sunlight, she was the only one who carried a dark shadow with her—and yet, like the evening dew or a tiled roof gleaming in the moonlight, she was the only one who appeared to gleam lustrously. In those moments, all the colors and sounds around Shin disappeared, leaving her as the only thing that was inarguably present.

If somebody told him she was a supernatural being or a demon, he wouldn't have questioned it. He had never seen a girl like her before.

He picked up the feather, stared at it for a long while, and stuffed it into his breast pocket.

The day after Jusetsu's visit to the Samon Palace, Kajo turned up at the Yamei Palace. Jusetsu assumed that she was bringing over some more reading materials, but as it turned out, she wanted some advice.

Kajo's face, which usually looked so pleasant and cheerful, was clouded by sorrow. "I just can't work out what to do. I could do with borrowing some of your wisdom, amei." She let out a sigh.

"What's the problem?" Jusetsu asked.

"Are you familiar with the term 'Black-robed Niangniang?'"

Jusetsu's eyes opened wide in surprise. "I am."

Never mind being familiar with the term, Jusetsu *was* Black-robed Niangniang. She assumed Kajo didn't know about it, but it didn't seem like that

was the case.

Kajo forced an awkward smile. “You see, I don’t believe that you and the Black-robed Niangniang are the same person. They’re setting the Raven Consort up to be somebody more mysterious and precious than she needs to be and using her as an outlet for their own suffering and prayers. If you take one wrong step here, you could end up in serious danger.”

Kajo knew the horrors that could be associated with religion through her own experiences with the True Teachings of the Moon. Her expression then turned even more sorrowful.

“Some of those who devote themselves to this ‘Black-robed Niangniang’ have never even met you. The very image of you has become an object of idolatry, taking on a life of its own and being made to look like a god... There are even people who are using that image to commit fraud.”

“Are you talking about the lucky talismans?” asked Jusetsu.

“Yes. Did you know about that?”

“I have a good idea of who is selling them, as well as who the mastermind of the plot might be.”

Tankai got ahold of one of the talismans being sold and it was clear the one making them was Hakurai. The writing on it matched up exactly with the writing Jusetsu remembered seeing on a talisman she saw before.

Hakurai had coconspirators in the Hakkaku Palace. The lady-in-waiting who asked Jusetsu to go to the Samon Palace *did* work there, according to Jiujiu, but it wasn’t clear who she was.

Tankai’s research suggested that the source of the counterfeit lucky talismans was also somewhere inside the Hakkaku Palace. The group expected that their origin would be easy to track down just by speaking to people who owned one, but it turned out that everyone was more tight-lipped than anticipated and that made the job difficult. It seemed like they had been told to keep quiet. They all had excuses, like how the Raven Consort had been asked to write the lucky talismans out especially for them, so she could get in trouble if the source was leaked. Even when people were told that the talismans were fake, they refused

to believe it. Despite that, Tankai managed to drag the truth out of them somehow—he didn't reveal exactly how—and he discovered that the talismans were purchased from a Hakkaku Palace eunuch. The identity of the said eunuch, however, was still under investigation.

The person who was fanning the flames of the hysteria—something that Onkei was looking into—was also traced back to the Hakkaku Palace. Court ladies and eunuchs all had their own ties to other palaces, so Onkei had methodically studied those very relationships.

“My eunuchs have been looking into the situation,” Jusetu explained to Kajo, unfolding a piece of paper onto her table. “I didn't realize that court ladies and eunuchs had so many links to one another.”

The names of every court lady and eunuch that worked for each palace were written on the paper, with lines drawn between those who were friendly. That was enough to show just how the palaces within the inner palace were interlinked.

“To start off with, there are links between people due to their roots—for example, if someone is from a merchant family or is the daughter of a wealthy farmer. And then there's the case of geographical origin. The majority of these people come from the imperial capital, but their friends can depend on whether they were from the east, or the west, or near or far from the imperial estate itself. Daughters of imperial officials are cliquey and choose not to associate with daughters from other types of families. As for the eunuchs, their places of origin are very diverse, which means they have stronger ties to those who are from the same village or town. For example...” Jusetu pointed at the name of a certain eunuch from the Hakkaku Palace. “This person is from Yoku Province, and so is a eunuch from the Hien Palace. As a result, these two are friends, despite working at different palaces. In addition, they both have colleagues they're on good terms with at their respective palaces, which creates additional indirect links. Together, these links show how faith in 'Black-robed Niangniang' spread from a eunuch at the Hakkaku Palace.”

This extensive web led to the swift propagation of the “Black-robed Niangniang” tale.

“It must have been hard work finding out this much information...” Kajo said in wonder as she looked over the chart. “Your eunuchs are marvelous.”

“Indeed, they are.” Jusetsu felt proud and yet embarrassed at the same time. She didn’t feel like this when she herself was being praised.

“Going by this chart, it does appear that the Hakkaku Palace is where this all originated from.”

“It may have started when I saved Banka... Or rather, the Crane Consort,” suggested Jusetsu.

But perhaps it started before that. After venturing out of the Yamei Palace more often, she started listening to a lot of different people’s requests... Maybe it even began with Koshun’s first request?

“And who was the mastermind behind this?” Kajo asked.

“Well...”

Which of the ladies-in-waiting at the Hakkaku Palace could be spearheading the movement? Hakurai was the one pulling the strings in the background, with Choyo behind him. The link between the two of them had been confirmed. Had that been revealed because it was in their best interests to do so—in order for them to better threaten her?

Jusetsu had been threatened, being told to hide quietly away in the Yamei Palace if she wanted to live. If this commotion in the inner palace became even louder, or if an uprising were to be staged here, it’d be the same as what happened with the True Teachings of the Moon. Jusetsu would not go unpunished.

Hakurai hated Uren Niangniang, but what did Choyo think of her? Was Jusetsu—or Uren Niangniang—a hindrance to him as the father of the Crane Consort?

Jusetsu fell silent.

“Amei?” Kajo called out to her, bringing her back to reality.

“Oh yes,” she began again. “...We’re looking into the ladies-in-waiting at the Hakkaku Palace. That should provide us with the answers we need.”

“Is that so? In any case, it looks like this all comes down to that palace. I’ll have to get the Crane Consort to resolve the matter then,” said Kajo. She let out a dejected sigh.

“Is that right? Do you really need to trouble yourself over things like that?”

“Well, we wouldn’t want to hassle His Majesty with it.”

The highest-ranking consort was fundamentally in charge of affairs in the inner palace. The issue of the counterfeit lucky talismans was not significant enough for the Bridle House to get involved with, not yet. It was just a strange religious uproar. It seemed like Kajo, as the head of the inner palace, was obliged to deal with it now before it developed further into an enormous pandemonium.

“I shall speak to the Crane Consort about it,” Kajo said. “She may be young, but she is very sensible, even if she doesn’t let it show very often.”

“That’s true...”

The first time Jusetsu met her, she found the young girl to be detached and hard to get a read of. However, in reality, Banka was introspective and a deep thinker. She was also considerate of others and had a good grasp of the positions they were in and the behavior these positions required of them. She was no clueless little girl.

Perhaps Banka does have some knowledge of this situation.

Still, it was unlikely that she and Choyo were on the same page. Banka despised Hakurai from the depths of her being—so much so that she expressed it while delirious, suffering from his curse. She couldn’t have been lying at that time.

Jusetsu got the impression that, slowly but surely, the true forms of Banka, Hakurai and Choyo were being revealed.

“I’m so pleased I consulted you about this, amei. Thank you so much.”

The shadow of gloom that had been cast over Kajo’s face was now lifted somewhat. The woman gave Jusetsu a beaming smile before making her way home.

That evening, Koshun came to the Yamei Palace.

“Is it true that you’ve been to the Samon Palace?” he asked in a somewhat demanding tone as soon as he arrived.

Jusetsu was taken aback. “Oh... I suppose you must be talking about yesterday.”

“Why would you go there on your own authority? No, never mind that—did you make it away unharmed? Not that I’ve heard otherwise.”

He seemed upset. His expression was as calm and as blank as ever, but unusually for him, he was avoiding getting to the crux of the matter.

“I don’t understand what you’re attempting to say,” Jusetsu replied. “I highly recommend that you calm down. Have some tea.”

She never expected a day would come when she’d be telling Koshun to calm down.

He obediently drank some tea, as he was told. “...I’m sorry. I was just worried.”

“Oh.” Jusetsu didn’t know how to respond to such a candid confession.

“You should have been warned to take care around Saname Choyo. I never expected that he would invite you to the Samon Palace.”

“Watch out for my father,” Jusetsu recalled Banka telling her.

“I received a warning from another source. Don’t worry.”

“Another source?”

“From Banka,” Jusetsu replied.

“Banka...?”

“I think I should explain,” she began. “Choyo and Hakurai are linked, but I don’t know how much has gotten through to Banka. She hates Hakurai, but when it comes to her father, she feels both respect and fear.”

She might not have ever met him, but Jusetsu loathed Choyo. No father

who'd force their daughter into making a choice like he did was worth the time of day, no matter how much Banka herself liked him.

"...Choyo knows your secret. He probably knows the secret of the Raven Consort too," Koshun said calmly, making Jusetsu scowl. "I don't know where he got the information from, however. He sees you as his enemy. I should have warned you to be careful sooner, although it doesn't seem like he's going to cause you any immediate harm."

"I wasn't...harmed. In the end, I turned the tables on him."

"Did you now?" Koshun asked.

"Choyo just threatened me to stay quietly confined to my palace, although he used Hakurai to pass on the message. I haven't actually met Choyo." Jusetsu then remembered another detail. "Oh, I did come across two who I believe to be Banka's older brothers."

"Choyo's eldest and youngest son are here with him. It must have been them."

"What about the middle one?" she asked.

"He was apparently left behind in Ga Province. It seems like he's the one who Choyo trusts the most."

"That must be difficult for the eldest."

"Well, I suppose he will still be the one to succeed Choyo, but yes..." Koshun said, trailing off. "Putting Saname family affairs aside, did they say or do anything to you?"

"No, nothing. We just glanced at each other. It didn't seem like they guessed who I was, and they naturally despised Hakurai."

"That's good to hear."

"Judging by the way they were acting, Choyo hasn't dragged his sons into any of this. He must be communicating with Hakurai independently to cause trouble."

"Hmm..." Koshun crossed his arms and thought to himself. "I see. So he's been acting independently, has he...?"

“Sometimes I hate it that you think things through alone,” Jusetsu muttered.

Koshun suddenly looked up. “What?” he said.

“...I’m not saying it again.”

“It’s all right, I heard you. Do you really? I don’t think it’d be sensible to express all of my thoughts out loud either...”

“I’m not asking you to tell me everything,” she said. “It depends on the circumstances.”

“...Should I tell you what I’m thinking now, then?”

Jusetsu nodded.

“All right. I was thinking about the distinctive characteristics of the Saname clan. For them, the judgment of the head of the clan is absolute. I believe I’ve told you this before, but they have a custom of revering their elders to the extreme. The flip side of that is that the head of the clan carries a heavy responsibility as a result. The head of the family must not handle things incorrectly, and he must not betray the clan’s trust. Further still, he never consults the opinions of his inferiors. I expect Choyo’s father was much the same as he is. As a result, Choyo wouldn’t discuss anything with his sons—his decisions are his and his alone. I believe that’s what’s at play here.”

“I see...”

“He is acting for the good of the Saname clan. He would probably go as far as to betray me if it was for the benefit of the clan as a whole. He said that, for the moment, he will serve me for the sake of his clan’s security.”

“He will serve you?”

“That could, in other words, mean eliminating you,” Koshun said.

So that’s it. It all made sense to Jusetsu now.

“And yet he’s telling me to stay quiet?”

“There are aspects to his actions that are impossible to understand, as in this case. I do recommend that you keep a low profile.”

“Are you telling me to lie low as well?” Jusetsu was slightly offended.

“No,” replied Koshun. “I’m just saying you should refrain from doing anything that might attract his attention...”

“Why should I try to appease him?”

Jusetsu turned her face away. She understood what Koshun was saying, she truly did, but it infuriated her all the same. She could comprehend the logic behind it, but she couldn’t control her emotions. No amount of reason could override her feelings.

“I’m just...worried about you,” Koshun said, a mix of irritation and uneasiness in his voice. It wasn’t clear if it was the way Jusetsu was speaking that was making him feel uneasy or if it was his own frustration.

Jusetsu looked back at the emperor. When she saw the look on his face, she realized it was the latter. He didn’t look like he was angry at her. He was giving her a troubled look, like he was at a loss at what to do. And it wasn’t *her* that was troubling him—it was just that the situation was too much. Jusetsu knew exactly how he felt, as she had found herself in the same position. She couldn’t understand why her emotions had taken such a hold of her. Koshun was the only person who could make her feel so irritated and so hesitant at the same time like this.

“...I understand,” she said eventually. “I was supposed to stay quiet from the very beginning.”

“No, that’s not...” Koshun began, but then bit his tongue for a moment. “I shall pay careful attention to movements in the Samon Palace. They’re leaving the imperial capital in around a fortnight. I doubt Choyo will do anything particularly aggressive once he’s back in Ga Province.”

Koshun left her with those parting remarks before leaving the Yamei Palace, more flustered than he usually was.

Jusetsu failed to mention the “Black-robed Niangniang” issue that night, but she expected that he had already received a report about it. She didn’t feel comfortable speculating on the issue without Kajo around, after all. *I shall talk to him about the situation once I know a bit more*, she thought to herself.

She would later come to realize that this was a mistake.

Kajo headed to the Hakkaku Palace, taking some ladies-in-waiting and eunuchs with her. A juniper hedge surrounded the palace in an almost protective manner. Small berries were growing among its leaves, which were as fine as needles. Beyond the hedge, the group could see a palace building with blue glazed roof tiles gleaming so lustroously that they looked as if they were wet. The roof's decorative tiles depicted a crane with its wings open, and the fretwork on the lanterns hanging beneath them also featured a crane pattern. The roofed mud wall that encircled the palace building was coated with mica, giving it a white shimmer. As they passed through the gate, the palace's court ladies and eunuchs—who were all standing in a row—bowed with their hands together to respectfully welcome Kajo.

Among them was the Crane Consort, on her knees awaiting her visitor, with her ladies-in-waiting behind her. The Crane Consort's face was unusually pale, her cheeks and lips covered with thick red makeup in an apparent effort to conceal it. However, the makeup only served to highlight her sickly complexion even more.

Banka then led them into the spacious main palace building, which had a view of the garden through its open doorway. It was the garden where Koshun apparently had gardenias planted in place of the peonies that reminded him so much of his mother. The gardenias' plump, oval-shaped fruits were starting to turn vermillion.

When Kajo saw the swelling fruit, she found herself reminded that she would no longer be able to have children of her own. The feeling blew through her like a cold wind winding through her chest. It wasn't a feeling of discontentment, nor one of despair—it simply passed through, like a quiet autumn breeze sweeping across her body.

The Crane Consort's ladies-in-waiting brought over some tea. You could tell by the aroma wafting from it that this was of the finest quality, just like that which would be served to the emperor. Her ladies-in-waiting's behavior and the way they carried themselves was dignified and gracious, making it impossible to find anything to find fault with. Kajo's only concern was the black decorative strings hanging from their belts. She glanced at them, then looked over at the

other ladies-in-waiting who were watching and waiting in the corner of the room. Each one had the same black decorative string hanging from their waists. One of them was even wearing a fish-shaped ornament, just like the one that Jusetsu herself had.

The Crane Consort, who was sitting in front of her, just had a piece of silverwork hanging from her belt instead, with no black string. She wore a dark green shanqun decorated with an embroidered pattern featuring birds facing one another into it, paired with a striped turquoise and deep purple skirt. It seemed likely that both of these pieces had been made from Saname silk. They had a beautiful, soft luster to them.

Banka didn't say anything—after all, it was a rule that a higher-ranking consort would be the one to initiate conversation.

“What lovely tea. Is it from Bu Province?” Kajo began, starting with a low-risk topic.

“Yes, jiejie,” Banka replied, saying very few words and using a respectful term of address used when speaking to higher-ranking consorts. Banka was feeling unwell, so she was drinking plain boiled water instead of tea.

“You haven't lost weight by any chance, have you?” Kajo asked.

“I have, a little bit... I don't have much appetite. Summer fatigue is probably to blame.” Banka wrapped both her hands around her cup of hot water as if she was peering into it. Kajo couldn't help but wonder what she could see reflected there. The young woman's face and fingers were swollen considering how much thinner she'd gotten. They looked puffy.

“Are you close to the Raven Consort? You must be close in age.”

Banka looked up. Kajo's sudden question left her with a blank look of amazement on her face. This expression made her look younger than she actually was.

“Ye... No,” she said. “We're not close.”

“It would be nice if the two of you could get along. She's a very kind person,” stated Kajo.

“...I’m well aware of that.”

“Yes. Well then, you shouldn’t cause any inconvenience for her.”

Banka stared fixedly at Kajo’s face. “Has something happened to her?” she asked.

“We can’t *allow* anything to happen to her. That’s what I’m saying.”

Banka seemed flustered, her eyes welling up. Even so, she appeared to understand what Kajo was trying to say.

“Do you want something from me?” she asked.

“I want you to keep an eye on the people who work here at the Hakkaku Palace. Keep hold of the reins and make sure you don’t let go. That is the duty of a consort who has been entrusted with her own palace.”

Banka didn’t even blink as she listened to Kajo’s words. She gave her a slight nod. “I understand,” she said. “Is that right? I did notice what was happening in this palace, but I barely ever go outside, so I didn’t have any idea what was going on there. Has this pandemonium spread outside too?”

“It’s spread throughout the entire inner palace,” stated Kajo.

Banka fell silent. It was impossible to tell whether she was truly oblivious, or whether she knew and had just sat back and done nothing.

“I’m sorry,” said Banka. “I shall have a word with those who work here.”

“I’m glad you understand. I’ll be relying on you to do so.”

The pair may not have broached the topic directly, but as long as Banka got the message, that was all that mattered.

Kajo stood up to leave.

“...Please wait a moment, Mandarin Duck Consort,” somebody called out to stop her—but it wasn’t Banka. Instead, it was one of the ladies-in-waiting who’d been standing in the corner of the room. She looked young, perhaps in her late teens. She had a pale, egg-shaped face with refined features and a modest appearance.

The lady-in-waiting took a step forward and began to speak, sounding as if

she was voicing an objection.

“Are you *condemning* our love for Black-robed Niangniang, Mandarin Duck Consort?” A black decorative string hung from the young woman’s belt. “You may be of high status, but do you not feel that it’s a step too far to criticize us for what is in our hearts? Are we not free to believe and worship whatever we want?”

The earnest determination of this lady-in-waiting with clear, piercing eyes made Kajo flinch and take a step back. She was horrified. Kajo never expected it to come to this.

“How rude,” the young woman said. “Leave, won’t you?”

Kajo’s lady-in-waiting raised her eyebrows and stepped forward. “Didn’t you see how reasonable the Mandarin Duck Consort was in her explanation? You are making a mess of this palace. What does freedom have to do with distributing counterfeit lucky talismans?”

“There must be some misunderstanding. Those talismans are not counterfeit. Are you using such lies to suppress our faith?”

“How foolish...”

“What are you calling foolish?” another, older lady-in-waiting exclaimed. “That’s no better than ridiculing Black-robed Niangniang herself. *You* are the one who’s being rude.”

“Exactly. It’s awful!”

The other ladies-in-waiting from the Hakkaku Palace all joined in with the criticism. Their voices became higher and higher as they became more agitated. Kajo’s ladies-in-waiting shrank away, sensing that something strange was at play.

This isn’t good.

This couldn’t be allowed to happen. Kajo looked toward Banka. The Crane Consort was standing, but she just stared at her ladies-in-waiting in a blank daze. This was no longer something she could control, either.

Kajo had moved to the back but was startled to find that there were more

people behind her. When she turned around, she realized that more court ladies and eunuchs were peering into the room from the outer passage. They, too, had black decorative strings hanging from their belts.

“K-Kajo...?”

Beyond them, the eunuchs that Kajo brought with her looked baffled. Her ladies-in-waiting came over to stand next to her, their faces tense.

“Mandarin Duck Consort, take back what you said earlier.”

The Crane Consort’s ladies-in-waiting slowly made their way over to her.

Kajo’s heart was racing.

While Jusetsu was teaching Ishiha how to write, someone came running into the palace building in a panic.

“R-Raven Consort!”

It was Ki Senjo, a lady-in-waiting from the Hakkaku Palace. She had Onkei and Tankai with her. Sensing that whatever was happening was no trivial matter, Jusetsu jumped to her feet.

“What’s wrong?”

“Niangniang, there’s been an incident at the Hakkaku Palace,” said Onkei. “It sounds like something has happened to the Mandarin Duck Consort, but she hasn’t been very clear.”

“To Kajo...? Ki Senjo, what happened?”

“Well...”

Senjo was out of breath, so Jiujiu got her to drink some water.

This has happened before, Jusetsu remembered. The last time was when Banka had her emergency.

“Is it Kajo that’s in danger, not Banka? Is Kajo at the Hakkaku Palace?” Jusetsu asked.

Senjo nodded. *Kajo and the Hakkaku Palace...* Jusetsu had an idea about why

she might be there.

“She went there to see Banka, I assume to discuss the ‘Black-robed Niangniang’ matter.”

“Yes... And the ladies-in-waiting at the Hakkaku Palace...got angry,” Senjo explained, wiping away her sweat.

“Angry...? At the Mandarin Duck Consort?”

“Yes. It’s so strange. I was scared and slipped away to come here while it was still unfolding. I thought something might happen to the Mandarin Duck Consort...and that you would be the only one who could stop it.”

“But Banka is there, isn’t she?”

Senjo shook her head sadly. “Nobody listens to what Banka says anymore. They won’t even listen to Kitsu Rokujo.”

Kitsu Rokujo was a lady-in-waiting who’d been working for Banka for a long time. She was once a zealous follower of the Eight True Teachings and was the one most distraught when the curse caused Banka to collapse. She was most grateful when Jusetu saved her.

“...All right. I’m going. Let’s hurry.”

Jusetu left the Yamei Palace with Onkei and Tankai, leaving a concerned-looking Jiujiu and Ishiha behind.

By the time Jusetu arrived at the Hakkaku Palace, there were eunuchs fighting outside the palace building. They were all from either the Hakkaku Palace or the Eno Palace. She left them to grapple and hurl insults at each other for the time being and went up the steps. Hearing what sounded like a container smashing, Jusetu hurriedly flew inside.

A table had been knocked over, and a tea set was scattered on the floor. Next to it, ladies-in-waiting were pulling at each other’s clothes and hair. Their hairstyles were a complete mess and their ruquns were torn. No one even noticed Jusetu enter.

Hearing sobbing below her, Jusetu looked down. Kajo had collapsed to the

ground near the doorway, and one of her ladies-in-waiting was crying beside her.

“Kajo!” Jusetu knelt down next to her in a fluster.

“Amei...?” said Kajo, looking up at her.

Jusetu helped her to her feet. “Are you hurt?”

“No, I just fell over by accident. I’m completely fine...” she insisted, but she grimaced when she moved her legs. She may have twisted something.

“Kajo was tripped when she was trying to make her way out,” her young lady-in-waiting said tearfully. “Those other ladies-in-waiting were coming over to her with such frightening looks on their faces.”

“I didn’t say things the right way. I dealt with the situation incorrectly. I didn’t expect it to come to this...”

“But Kajo...” the lady-in-waiting said.

“We can discuss it later. Let’s get out of here,” said Jusetu. “Tankai?”

She looked behind her. Tankai and Onkei were standing there.

“Take Kajo to the Eno Palace,” she ordered.

“Understood. Please excuse me, Mandarin Duck Consort.”

Tankai effortlessly picked up Kajo up and took her from of the room. Jusetu watched them leave, then proceeded further inside.

“Stop this, all of you!” she called out, but it was to no avail. Her voice was drowned out by the shrill cries of the ladies-in-waiting and the sounds of fighting. She was getting nowhere.

There were nearly ten people fighting here. Deciding to start with those nearest her, Jusetu pulled apart two ladies-in-waiting brawling nearby. She called Onkei and had him arrest both of them.

“Oh, Raven Consort...”

Shocked to see Jusetu, they respectfully yielded. It seemed like being physically pulled apart finally brought them back to their senses. *At this rate, we should be able to settle things*, Jusetu thought, but at that very moment, a

strikingly sharp screech rang out from elsewhere.

“Let go!” somebody screamed—or at least that seemed to be what they said.

“Oh no,” said Jusetsu, turning in the direction the cry came from, but as she did so, a shadow was cast over her.

There was a dull thud—an unpleasant sound, like two hard objects smacking together. Jusetsu wasn’t the one who was hit, but someone else was crouched down beside her. Blood was dripping onto the floor.

One of the fighting ladies-in-waiting had thrown a cup at Jusetsu, sending it soaring through the air. Onkei instantly let go of the ladies-in-waiting he caught and dashed over to act as her shield, but someone else beat him to it.

“Attendant Ei...” said Onkei, flabbergasted. It sounded like he couldn’t believe his eyes.

Eisei was on his knees, clutching his forehead. Unable to comprehend what just happened, Jusetsu was frozen to the spot.

He...protected me? Jusetsu thought. *Me? Eisei? Why?*

“Everyone, stay where you are,” came an order in a calm, yet stern and well-projected voice.

Koshun stood in the entrance. The ladies-in-waiting hurriedly prostrated themselves before him, shocked looks on their faces. All it had taken was a brief few words from him to quell the commotion.

Koshun slowly walked over and stopped next to Eisei. He took a handkerchief out of his breast pocket and passed it to him.

“Is it a deep wound?” he asked.

“No.”

After the two of them had this brief exchange, Eisei pressed the handkerchief to his forehead and stood up, taking no notice of Jusetsu.

Koshun looked around the room. It was in a terrible state—furnishings were damaged or broken, and even the ladies-in-waiting themselves were disheveled.

“Crane Consort,” Koshun called out to Banka.

Now that she thought about it, Jusetsu hadn’t seen Banka anywhere. This prompted her to take another look around the room, and when she did, she noticed a young girl crouching in the corner of the room, who then staggered to her feet. It was Banka. Her face was blue, and she was hanging her head.

“Are you hurt?” Koshun asked.

“...No,” she replied meekly.

“Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

Banka wearily lifted her chin and lethargically shook her head. “No... My mismanagement is to blame.”

“She...” Jusetsu tried to interject, but Koshun turned around and used his gaze to stop her.

“One of the Mandarin Duck Consort’s eunuchs told me what happened,” the emperor said. “I’m pleased to hear that the Mandarin Duck Consort has not been seriously injured, but...”

Koshun stared quietly at the ladies-in-waiting in the room. This silence had a sense of chilling indignation, the sort that made people cower. The air in the room was as cold and tense as a winter chill, oppressive and piercing to the skin. Jusetsu was suddenly reminded that Koshun was still a warrior. After all, he once led the imperial defense army to overthrow the empress dowager’s faction.

The ladies-in-waiting were trembling, unable to bring themselves to look up.

“I want you all to lift your heads and look around.”

The ladies-in-waiting hesitantly raised their heads and did as he said. After seeing the dismal state of the room, and of themselves, Jusetsu could hear some of them groan.

Koshun’s words were brief. “You should be ashamed of your actions.”

The ladies-in-waiting drooped their heads.

“I will inform you all of your punishment at a later date,” he announced, and

turned back the way he came.

He then cast a glance over at Jusetsu. A brief hint of worry and gloom flashed across his face before it disappeared.

“Raven Consort. You, too, must bear some of the blame,” he said softly, his voice coming out in something of a sigh. “As with the others, I will inform you of your punishment another time.”

He left her with that and exited the palace building. Eisei followed behind him like a shadow. Jusetsu stood there in a daze as she watched them walk away, feeling very different from how she usually felt when she watched him leave the Yamei Palace.

From then on, the wearing of black accessories and clothing was forbidden in the inner palace, with one exception—the Raven Consort.

One night a few days later, Jusetsu was all alone in a room, and Eisei visited the Yamei Palace by himself. He had a bandage wrapped around his forehead, bright white even in the dark of the night. It looked painful.

“...How is your injury?” Jusetsu asked.

“It’s nothing serious,” he replied, his voice abrasive. “I only helped you because my master ordered me to do so. There’s no need to trouble yourself over it.”

Jusetsu wasn’t sure if he was telling the truth or if he was saying that to make her feel better. *No, surely Eisei would be the last person to try to do that,* Jusetsu thought to herself. Still, she wasn’t sure what his intentions were.

“I have come to deliver a message from my master,” he announced, his voice even colder than the night air.

“A message?”

He had come to inform her of her punishment. “For the time being, you shall be forbidden from leaving the Yamei Palace.”

Jusetsu was speechless.

“Of course, the role of the Raven Consort lies outside of the laws of the inner palace, so you are under no obligation to listen to my master’s orders. However...”

“I know. On this occasion, I’m reaping what I sowed. I should have acted on the situation earlier, and I should have informed Koshun of it,” Jusetsu said. “... No, it’s even more than that. I encroached on territory that the Raven Consort was never supposed to. I went too far.”

Having people place their trust in her felt so good that she got carried away. She tried to reason to herself that she couldn’t leave people who were in trouble to fend for themselves. She ended up basking in the joy of being needed—oblivious to how dangerous it really was.

“...I have been concerned about that for some time now,” said Eisei, his voice now sounding more dejected than cold.

Jusetsu silently looked up at him.

“Please try to keep a low profile,” he said. “It’s for your own good.”

Eisei turned toward the doorway, as if to avoid looking at her. He left the palace building as unobtrusively as he’d arrived. Jusetsu didn’t go outside to see him off.

I doubt Koshun will pay me any more of his usual visits, Jusetsu thought to herself.

While the sun was high in the sky, Koshun went to check on Kajo. It had only been a few days since the riot, but the inner palace had already regained its sense of calm.

Upon visiting the Eno Palace, he found her lying down on a divan.

“Oh, Your Majesty.”

Kajo went to get up, but Koshun stopped her.

“You can stay there,” he said. “How is your leg?”

“I don’t have any pain anymore. Everybody’s worried about me, so I’ve been

lying still like this—but it's just so boring."

Kajo slowly sat up with the help of her ladies-in-waiting and faced Koshun. "I made such a disastrous move on this occasion. I thought I would just say something before a commotion could break out, but instead, I ended up being the one to instigate it," she explained. "I am truly ashamed. I should have instructed the ladies-in-waiting to stay calm beforehand..."

"You were tactfully taken advantage of. She was looking for an opportunity. When one of her ladies-in-waiting voiced her objections, another lady-in-waiting seized the opportunity to stir things up."

"What do you mean...?"

"I assume you saw the older lady-in-waiting who was there. She's a long-serving lady-in-waiting of the Crane Consort, named Kitsu Rokujo."

"Oh, yes." Kajo looked off into space, seeming to recall who he was talking about. "That's right. The first one to speak up was a young woman, but then an older one derided me for ridiculing 'Black-robed Niangniang.' After that, the other ladies-in-waiting went along with it."

"Kitsu Rokujo was the head lady-in-waiting, so to the other women, her words seemed to hold even more weight than the young Crane Consort. She could have been the one to calm and restrain them, but instead, she was the one to instigate and stir up the commotion."

"Where is she now...?"

"She killed herself before the Bridle House had the chance to investigate anything," Koshun explained. "She left a note in which she stated that she was entirely to blame."

Kajo's eyebrows drooped, and she made a forlorn expression. "Does that mean that she was also to blame for the counterfeit talismans?"

"Her note said as much. She said that she did it to gain more followers for 'Black-robed Niangniang' and she had no intention of lining her own pockets or causing any chaos. She claimed that she copied the writing from a talisman another lady-in-waiting owned, and that she ordered a eunuch to pressure people in the inner palace into buying them."

However, according to what Jusetsu said in response to the Bridle House's investigations, the writing on the counterfeit lucky talismans was identical to Hakurai's, which she had seen before. The counterfeit talismans definitely came from him. Kitsu Rokujo accepted and circulated them throughout the inner palace. She had also been the lady-in-waiting who acted as a messenger to summon Jusetsu to the Samon Palace.

Both stories made it clear that Choyo was at the core of the conspiracy, yet Kitsu Rokujo had taken all the blame herself and died. Now that she was gone, it would be difficult to investigate any potential ties to Choyo.

It must have been decided in advance that she would be one to take the blame, anticipating that—if a disturbance were to unfold—somebody would be executed for being the ringleader. They were even so efficient that they provided poison for her to take and set up a note for her to leave.

"How is the Raven Consort?" Kajo asked.

"She is keeping to herself inside the Yamei Palace."

"Oh..." Kajo looked sympathetic. "It's not as if she even did anything wrong."

She was right—and Jusetsu didn't even need to obey Koshun's orders. Despite that, she chose to stay cooped up inside the palace, saying that she was the one to sow the seeds.

What could have been done?

Even Kitsu Rokujo, the one to fan the flames, had no way of knowing that a riot of that scale would happen. The very existence of the Raven Consort was what started it all in the first place. It was her nature, and the way she found herself unable to turn those down who looked to her for help, that promoted the mania.

Choyo's protests hit home with Koshun. An incident like this was likely to happen sooner or later, even without that man's involvement. He made quick work on demonstrating that to Koshun now. This disturbance itself acted as his admonition.

If he had gone this far on this occasion, what if they used the fact that the Raven Consort was a survivor of the previous dynasty's family to their

advantage? If Koshun didn't do something now, an even more dreadful commotion could unfold. That was the fear that Choyo was implicitly conveying to him.

"What about the Crane Consort? How is she?"

"Well, she's not hurt, but..." Koshun trailed off there.

"She hasn't been doing very well, has she?"

"Oh... It's been going on for a short while now. She's been suffering to some extent. I don't think the death of Kitsuo Rokujo helped."

"How are you going to punish those who work at the Hakkaku Palace?" Kajo asked.

"That's not yet decided. As Kitsuo Rokujo already shouldered the blame and died, we're in the process of discussing how to deal with the Crane Consort and her ladies-in-waiting."

"It might be a good idea to wait a while before deciding on a punishment," suggested Kajo.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you may have to issue a pardon."

Koshun was skeptical of her words, but Kajo just gave him a faint smile.

As it turned out, a certain favorable event really did lead to the ladies-in-waiting being pardoned.

Banka stood on the terrace of the Samon Palace and gazed at the pond. The sunlight was dazzling on the water's calm surface.

"Has Hakurai already made his escape?" she asked her father, Choyo, who was sitting in the chair behind her and drinking a cup of tea.

"...No 'Hakurai' has ever been here. If it's a conjurer from Uka named Gyokugan who you are asking about, then yes, he did stay here for a short while."

Clenching her fists, Banka turned back toward her father. "Kitsuo Rokujo is

dead. The least you can do is send her body back home to Ga Province. She has children.”

“It’s not as if I can take a criminal home with me. She will be buried here, in accordance with the rules of the inner palace.”

“Aren’t *you* the one who made her into a criminal, Father?!” Banka protested.

The expression on Choyo’s face didn’t move in the slightest. “...She knew what she was getting into. Can’t you see that by kicking up a fuss like you’re doing now, you’re trampling over her own choices?”

“I don’t. She didn’t do anything that would have been punishable by death. The only reason she had to die was to protect you, wasn’t it?”

“Not me. To protect the Saname clan as a whole.”

Something inside Banka snapped.

“All you ever talk about is what’s good for the Saname clan, what needs to be done for the sake of the Saname clan. Is there nothing more important to you than that?” she asked.

For the first time, Choyo looked at Banka with a quizzical frown on his face. “I’m the head of the clan. What do you expect?”

“How can you let the Saname clan’s own people die for its sake? It doesn’t make any sense.”

The lines between Choyo’s eyebrows deepened. He was clearly offended. “Sometimes, one person *does* have to die for the sake of the whole. That’s how the Saname clan has survived for all this time.”

“You’re right. The Saname clan has always been this way. Ever since the very beginning,” Banka replied. “Our people didn’t even have any qualms about sacrificing their youngest daughters for the sake of the clan.”

The look on Choyo’s face became more severe. Banka had never seen her father’s emotions before. This was the first time Banka had seen her father look that way.

“It’s not that they didn’t have any qualms about doing it,” he started. “That’s why...”

“That’s why they learned to sacrifice other people’s daughters instead. Was that for the sake of the clan as well?” she countered.

“I gave you the choice, did I not?” Choyo’s voice was cold and somber. “If you had a problem with someone else’s daughter dying, you should have chosen to die instead.”

Banka gulped. Her lips quivered. *I can’t believe him.*

“I *curse* being born as a daughter of the Saname family, from the depths of my being.” Her eyes were hot. She couldn’t stop her voice from shaking. “I shall never listen to anything you say, ever again. This will be the last time you ever see me.”

Choyo uttered a name—Banka’s real name—the one that only he and Banka herself knew.

“You are a member of the Saname clan,” he said. “You can’t escape from it. Neither of us can.”

“No,” she said. “I’ve had enough. I hate...”

Choyo whispered something, but Banka didn’t hear what it was.

“What did you say, Father?”

He now spoke in a dark, shadowy voice that sounded as if it was coming from somewhere in the distance. “I knew you were different too.”

“What...?”

“Nobody understands, and nobody knows what I did,” he said.

Suddenly, Banka found herself unable to make out her father’s face. It was as if there was a glare in the way. She could see him, but at the same time, she couldn’t. Or perhaps it was more like he was now someone she didn’t even recognize.

Banka was reminded of how little she actually knew about her father. Perhaps she knew nothing at all—nothing about the path he took to get to this point, and nothing about what he’d given up or let go of to get here.

“Father...”

All of a sudden, Banka didn't feel well and started to become lightheaded. She went cold, the blood seeming to drain from her body, starting with her feet. *Oh no, this can't be good*, she thought as she tried to will some strength into her legs. Her body ended up giving out instead.

I'm going to collapse...!

She quickly curled herself into a ball, but immediately lost consciousness, feeling as if darkness was sucking her in.

Banka woke up at the sound of somebody calling her name.

"Xiaomei? Oh, you're awake."

Xiaomei was a word her family used for younger sister.

"You idiot... Didn't the doctor tell us to let her sleep?"

She realized she could hear her brothers' voices. When she moved her head, she found Shin and Ryo beside her. Banka was lying on a bed in a room she couldn't remember seeing before.

"You're in one of the rooms in the Samon Palace. Do you remember collapsing?" said Shin, her eldest brother. He was frowning and looking displeased—although he always looked that way.

"I remember..." she started. "I'm sorry. I just started feeling unwell all of a sudden."

Ryo glanced at Shin as if there was something he wanted to say, but Shin ignored it completely.

"Hey, you," Ryo said. "Did you know?"

"Stop. Leave it until later," Shin reprimanded his brother, but this time, it was Ryo's turn to ignore him.

Ryo started again. "When we got the doctor to take a look at you, he..."

"Could tell I was pregnant?" Banka asked, beating her brother to it.

"What?" replied Ryo, the look on his face half-disappointed, half-relieved. "You knew?"

“I wasn’t completely sure, but... I hadn’t seen a doctor yet. I just thought I might be.”

“Our father did say that he hadn’t been notified of your pregnancy,” said Shin.

“Didn’t you hear me?” she said. “I told you I didn’t see a doctor about it yet. All I did was talk to one of my ladies-in-waiting about it.”

“Kitsu Rokujo?”

“No. She leaks—well, she leaked everything to our father,” Banka said.

“...So that’s why he didn’t know.”

“I’m not listening to him ever again.” Banka was feeling somewhat cheerful now. “I told him so as well.”

Her two brothers were taken aback, looking identical to one another as they had the same expressions on their faces.

“Surely he would never allow that to happen.”

“...Our father wouldn’t care about something like that.”

Shin and Ryo’s opinions were split on the issue.

“You’ll just be cast aside. Is that all right with you?”

“Why would she be cast aside? She’s pregnant with the emperor’s child. He’d never do that to her.”

“I mean cast aside, emotionally speaking.”

Banka crossed her arms in front of her chest. “Well, I’m going to try to cast him away too. Then, I’m going to try to look at him through a new lens.”

Shin and Ryo exchanged glances.

“The only version of my father I know is the one that exists today,” she explained. “...No, I don’t even know that one properly. You know what I mean, don’t you, Shin? He must have had a youngest sister too.”

“Oh... Yes. I suppose he did. Although I don’t really know much about that,” Shin answered tentatively, seeming perplexed.

“I want to find out what happened to our father. I’m sure he...”

I'm sure he is hurting.

Banka closed her eyes, then opened them again.

I want to find out what's hurting him.

She squinted. The room was filled with bright sunlight.

Banka, who was previously convinced she was simply rotting into mush inside a cocoon, now felt like she had broken out of her pupa shell and crawled out. At long last, she felt as if she could feel the light that was shining outside.

Jusetsu left the Yamei Palace discreetly, dressed as a eunuch. Onkei was the only person accompanying her.

Koshun had summoned her.

"I shall wait at the Winter Ministry," his letter had read. He wrote nothing else.

The Winter Ministry's subordinates came out to greet her and informed her that Koshun was anticipating her arrival. They showed her to a room with Eisei standing in front of the doorway. He bowed with his hands together in a superficial sign of respect, not even bothering to glance at her.

Jusetsu left Onkei there with him and proceeded to enter the room. Inside, she found not only Koshun, but Senri and Ho Ichigyo as well. She joined them as they sat around the table, with Koshun opposite her. It was the first time she had come face-to-face with him since the fiasco.

For a short while, Jusetsu kept her gaze directed toward the floor. She was somewhat frightened to see the expression on Koshun's face now. She remembered the cold, imposing atmosphere he brought with him into the Hakkaku Palace that night.

Even so, it wasn't as if she could keep looking away forever. Jusetsu slowly lifted her head and found Koshun staring straight ahead at her. His gaze was calm and composed, just like it had been the first time they met.

Why isn't it any different?

The way this made her feel stirred up so many emotions in her that she didn't know what to do with herself. Even so, she couldn't look away.

This case had made Jusetu painfully aware of the danger of her own existence, and just how frightening it was for her own existence to take on a life of its own. It turned into something it wasn't, far away from her own being. On this occasion, things had only gone as far as a skirmish in the inner palace, but who knew how things could end up if something similar happened again?

Jusetu expected Koshun not to be able to treat her in the same way he did before. As the person who extended a helping hand to her in the first place, he would be especially aware of the gravity of the situation—and yet the look in his eyes remained unchanged.

“...For a short while, I've been considering what the best course of action might be,” he began calmly. “I do not regret deciding that I would save you, neither am I going to change my mind. I am well aware of how dangerous the Raven Consort's existence can be. I understand that it is only natural that the Winter Sovereign—being the one who presided over rituals—would attract followers, and the very act of shutting such an individual away inside the inner palace is a mistake. People could argue that the Raven Consort should be eliminated because of the danger she presents, but it isn't that simple. It is not enough to simply seal her away and cover her up, as is done at present. We must unravel these tangled threads at a deeper, fundamental level, rather than forcibly cutting them loose or simply stopping thinking about it. Doing that won't solve anything at the end of the day.”

Jusetu couldn't tear her gaze away from Koshun's, not even for a moment. It wasn't that he didn't have his doubts. The less he regretted, the more suffering he'd experience. Even so, Koshun chose not to put a lid on it all, but to find a path together instead—even though there was no way of knowing how bumpy that path might be.

“We will start by correcting Kosho's mistake,” Koshun continued, his voice indifferent. He always made things sound so trivial, regardless of the topic he was talking about or the occasion.

Kosho's mistake—namely, shutting Uren Niangniang away.

“In order to do that, we will search for the other half of Uren Niangniang’s body. The Raven Consort is the one capable of doing that, and as a result, Kosho erected barriers to stop her from leaving. That means that we need to break them down. I have been talking to Ho Ichigyo about whether that would be possible.”

Koshun looked toward Ho.

“Indeed,” said Ho respectfully. “According to shamanic theory, there are no spiritual barriers that cannot be broken. That is because a boundary is something that’s ‘tied.’ For example, we tie thread together to form a boundary, or tie ivy into a loop. What has been tied can be untied. There will always be ruptures. And as for Kosho...” Ho crossed his fingers together. “She used her digits to create a barrier. Such a barrier can also be undone. She buried her digits at the nine gates. In other words, there are nine knots.”

“Are you suggesting that we undo them one by one?” asked Senri.

“No,” said Ho, shaking his head. “If we were to do that, the last knot to have been untied would return to its original state when you untied the next one. As a result, this is a barrier that can’t be broken by one person acting alone. It was made that way so the Raven Consort couldn’t break it by herself.”

“Does that mean,” started Koshun, “that it’s doable as long as someone isn’t doing it by themselves?”

“This is an example of replenishment magic,” Ho explained. “I say that the knots go back to how they were before, but that process can’t carry on forever. When one is untied, another is formed. It’s the skill of offsetting what happens to another knot to make the barrier unbreakable. Three knots will compensate for three more. As a result, three will need to be untied simultaneously. That is to say, in order to break this barrier, we need...”

“Three people,” said Jusetsu. “Don’t we?”

“That is correct. And they need to be people who are strong enough to break Kosho’s magic. Even if a Raven Consort had come up with the idea of breaking the barrier in the past, it would have been challenging for her to gather three people together in the first place. Under the shamans’ surveillance, she would have struggled to attract anyone to work with her who was powerful enough to

help.”

“This ‘three people’ includes the Raven Consort herself, doesn’t it?” Senri asked to confirm. “In that case, as long as we have you, we only need one more person.”

“Just one more...” Jusetsu muttered.

“There are no shamans in the imperial capital any longer,” said Ho, a solemn look on his face. “They all fled during the reign of the emperor before last. I wouldn’t know how to find them now...”

“I doubt they’d come back if we put out an official notice. They’d suspect it was a trap.” Koshun crossed his arms. “I suppose we have no choice but to begin a steady search effort in the countryside.”

Jusetsu went quiet. They needed one powerful shaman. Upon hearing this, one individual came to mind—but he wasn’t an option. He may have placed curses, but he’d never break one. He’d never cooperate with Jusetsu.

She was thinking of the one-eyed shaman, Hakurai.

In her mind’s eye, she saw an indigo ocean with violent, white waves.

In the next instant, it was gone.

All this time, I’ve been lying here, waiting in the stillness of the night.

Here, in the deepest depths of the sea—waiting for the day when I will return home.



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